THE CANONICAL ADVENTURES OF JACK & CHARLIE

VOLUME II

I.C.G.A.

THE CANONICAL

ADVENTURES OF JACK AND CHARLIE,

VOLUME II.

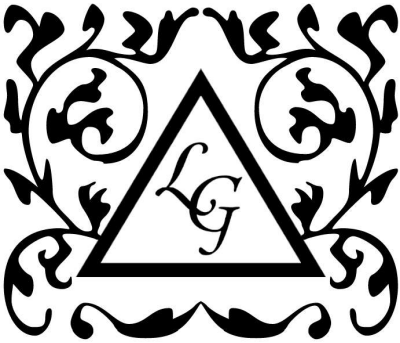
Being a collection of several narratives,

CONCERNING THE EXPLOITS OF THE TWO
titular characters. Produced by the

PROVIDENCE
OF THE VERY ṬING,

and several I.C.G.A. associates. Namely:
Sn. SAP and Sn. Sherm.

Presented in no specific order, and containing
works which are entirely original
to this very volume.



EDITVM ANNO DOMINI

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Edited and Crypto-Updated by
Sn. Sherm &c.

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EPIGRAMMA.

WRITTEN BY SN. SHERM AND TRANSLATED BY SN. V.O.

O, Lector, vidisti umquam
Nautae in mare propelluntur?
Ubi e portu longinqua navigabat;
Iacobus et Carolus esse videntur?
O, Lector, unquam percepisti suavitatem
Iter ad locum ignotum?
Ubi periculum est circa quamque rupem
Et collem et prodigia adhuc exhibendum?
O, Lector, tactum sensisti adventus longe?
Ubi miseritque manum ignoto tali
Narrat fabulam tam magnam et mirabilem videre?
O, Lector, si in genere scribere non potes
Magnam fabulam abnegare.
Deinde flete, nam relinquetis
Ad solum specto, non pars terrae.

THE CANONICAL
ADVENTURES OF JACK & CHARLIE
VOLUME II, CONSISTING OF

XVIII CHAPTERS.

Jack & Charlie Share a Phone Number. Cap. I.

NAurain was admiring his newly refurbished Palmyran estate. It was rather different from its previous form, prior to the great siege of Aleppo. The walls had been rebuilt and reinforced with iron. A new gatehouse stood on one side of the main entrance way. The roof had been repaired, and a few windows replaced where they'd been smashed during the battle. In the center of the courtyard,—a new fountain had been installed, though it was still without water.

The only thing that remained, as it had been before, was the large statue of a bull, standing in the center of the courtyard. It had been the pride of the old manor, and was now a bit tarnished. The exterior of the manor revealed plenty of influences: Greek and Roman, Byzantine and Sassanid, Persian and Phoenician, but most prominently,—Aztec, which was clearly a gesture of mockery towards the failed siege of his domain.

The roof was made of slate and tile, with some of the tiles decorated with depictions of bulls, in case any visitor forgot who their host was. The roof was also decorated with the heads of the last six of the eight hundred soldiers that he'd killed himself. The walls were made of a light-red stone that reminded him of blood. He wondered if he should replace them with something more durable.

He took a sip from a cup of wine:

"A nice drink for a fine day," he said aloud, and then spat into the fountain.

He walked into his manor. The interior was shockingly different. The furnishings were mostly the same, but the walls had been painted with scenes from the life of the Prophet Muhammad. A small niche near the front door held a statue of the Prophet. He walked into his study, it was furnished with bookshelves made of rammed earth, and housed texts from all over the world, arranged by subject.

As he sat down on his gaming chair, no sooner did his phone ring. Normally, he had his aide take the call, but this was his personal telephone. Whoever was calling was clearly a person of great importance...

He answered the call.

"Speak," he said.

"I hear your phone rang, *Nauraingatang*. Jack and Charlie gave me your contact information, nigga."

"Ah, those two Englishmen. I should have known they would send a wizened negro my way."

"Ay, nigga, how you know I'm black? You a racist? I hope you're not racist."

"No, I have read many books."

"Fuckin' what?"

Nourain looked over at his bookshelf; he began to list off some of the books:

"The Life of Christ, by Thomas Carlyle.
The Serenity of the Black, by Marcus Garvey.
The Bhagavad Gita, by Lord Krishna.
The Phenomenology of the Infinite, by
Yohannes of Gamala.
The Book of Genesis, by Karl Marx.
The Myth of the Ragged God, by Orville Dewey.
The Inequality of the Sexes, by Marquise de Sevigny.
The Diary of an Anarchist, by William Burroughs.
The History of the Slave Trade, by Theodor Geiger.
The Kama Sutra, by H. G. Wells.
The Philosophical Foundations of Islam,
by Sadeq al-Shāhīd.

The Second Treatise on Assyrian Poetry,
by Isaac Babel.
The Three Questions, by Bertrand Russell.
The Play of the Jews, by Randolph Bourne.
On the Interaction of Human Beings,
by Rosa Luxemburg.
The Eighty-ninth Treatise on Ethics, by Foucault.
The Purity of the Faith, by Henrich Schütz.
Anarchism and Nihilism, by John Dewey.
The Albanian Past, by Djordje Jovanovic.
A Philosophical Introduction to Horticultural
Sciences, by J. T. Comins.
An Analogy of Necessity, by Cheng-Chieh Huang.
The Astonishing Hypothesis, by Dewey.
The Advancement of Learning,
by Friedrich von Schlegel.
The Rational Hermeneutics of Aristotle,
by James McKeen Cattell.
The Principles of Scientific Management,
by Auguste Comte.
Voice from the Wilderness, by Chief Pascagoula.
The Ninety-Second Word of Wisdom, by Ngale Mwale.
Nigerian Love Song, by Sonny Okosun.
he Truth of All Religions, by Shalom Auslander.
Gossip of the Angels, by Paul Musgrave.
Childhood, My Sweet, by Vladimir Nabokov.
A Reading of The Reign of Charles the Second,
by John Milton.
The Absolute and the Human, by Dionysius Thrax.
The Biggest Person You've Never Met, by Gary Donlen.
The Birth of a New Syrian Ideology, by Said Algazi.
The Lessons of History, by Immanuel Kant.
Discourse on Ideals and Realities, by Richard Rorty.
The Aztec Codex, by Donald Hughes.
The Medicine of Asma'at, by Abdul-Karim Al Ghazali.
Isle of the Dead, by Viktor Suvorov.

The Ancient History of Mathematical Proofs,
by J. S. Franklin.
How to be a Wimp, by Wallace Terry.
The Rules of Cycles, by Ferdinand Weyl.
The Psychology of the Lovers, by Henri Bergson.
Art and Justice, by Martha Nussbaum.
Metaphysics: From Buddha to Hegel, by Slavoj Žižek.
The Dance of Anger, by Charles Mackay.
Ararat, by Adlai Stevenson.
The Guide to War Machines and Tactics,
by H. W. Robertson.
Introduction to the History of the History of
the History of Ideas, by Edmund Husserl.
The Evil and the Good, by Roger Scruton.
There is the Comforter, by Leon Kass.
Dante's Divine Comedy, by William L. Graves.
A History of the Negro Peoples of the World,
by Ida B. Wells.
The Decline of the West, by Samuel Huntington.
Democracy and Other Postures, by Shari Shattuck.
The Drowned and the Saved, by W. E. B. Du Bois.
The Tibetan Book of the Dead, by Padmasambhava.
The Twenty-eighth Symposium on Rhetoric,
by Hubert H. Bancroft.
The Seditious Theory of Property,
by Louis Auguste Blanqui.
On the Discrepancy Between the Natural
and the Induced Order of Nature,
by Count Lucien Stein.
The Divine Right of Kings, by Thomas Paine.
The Harmlessness of Sex, by Lao Tsu.
Pseudo-Freud, by Sigmund Freud.
Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, by
Ludwig Wittgenstein.
The Enemies of the Intellectual, by Alexander Herzen.
A Cook Book From Hell, by Jay Leno.

Liu Xia: My Cherished China, by Liu Xiaobo.
The Mayan Apocalypse, by H. P. Blavatsky.
The Immortal, the Distant, and the Living,
by Marcus Aurelius.
The Homosexual Spirit in Man, by H. Stuart Heaton.
The Oldest Book, by Phineas Parkhurst Quimby.
The Uto-Aztecan Menstrual Theory of Love,
by Alfredo O'Higgins.
The Hero With One Face, by Cixi.
War is the Health of the State, by Walter C. Langer.
The Assyrian Nights, by Edward Curtis.
Lust in French, by Boris Vian.
The Tao of Obedient Science, by Epictetus.
The Crusade for Turkey, by Denzil Holles.
Some Remarks on the Nature of Poetry,
by Czesław Miłosz.
A Critical Course in Kabbalah,
by Abraham H. Lehman.
This Alone is Earth's Most Spiritual Book,
by Dante Alighieri.
Discourse on Mushrooms, by Confucius.
D. B. Turner's Punctuated Equilibrium,
by J. J. C. Smart.
The Lesson of the Epileptic, by Akhenaton.
The Many Faces of Yoga, by Meher Baba.
The Great Book of Eastern Wisdom, by Paracelsus.
The Discovery of Hell, by Rumi.
The Blind Book Hunter, by Freya Stark.
Marduk and the Amy of Ishtar, by Menander I.
El Seyo, or: A Diptych on Truth,
by Santidep Niranjana.
The Battle of the Andean Princes,
by Antonio Pigafetta.
The Burning Bush, by Moses.
The Sacred Marriage: Or The Assayer, by Isaac Luria.
The Sublime Object of Beauty, by Tupac Kurosawa.

The Wreck of the Wreckage, by Mao Gootnick.
Negative Capability: A Theory of Justice, by John Rawls.
The Bogs of Finland: A Map, by Finns.
Light After Dark: African Fairy Tales, by Afua Cooper.
Sufi Magic and Sufism, by Antoni Zygmuntowicz-"

Naurain was about to continue, but the caller cut him off:

"Aight, nigga, I understand, you a well read, studious motherfucker. But yo, the question is this: Why can't I get my dick wet? I been looking for the answer for years now and I don't have it yet. It's like my dick is the only thing in the world that's not getting its share of knowledge. My name is Trappanggino. I'm a man who lives in the city of New-York, New York, United States of Amezecua, North America, Western Hemisphere, South America, Earth, Milky Way, Sol System; and I've been in love with knowledge since I was a kid. I got good grades in school and went to college, but no matter how hard I try, I can't find the answer to the question I asked: Why can't I get my dick wet without getting some goddamn kids!?"

Naurain had been expecting this kind of call. He was prepared to be patient. He knew he would need to do what he could, to make sure the caller didn't hang up before he found an answer:

"Let me tell you something about the world, Trappanggino," he said, "it's a big place and there are a lot of things to know. That's why there are so many different kinds of people in it. People who think, people who feel, people who believe, people who don't care about anything. And then, people like you; people who waste other people's time.

Do you even know who I am? Who are you, even? You're a nobody, just like I'm a nobody. So let me speak didactically: I don't know who you are or where you're from. I don't know if you're black, white, yellow, red, green, or blue. I don't know if you're male or female. I don't know your age, or how tall you are, or what kind of body you have. I don't know if you're rich or poor. I don't know if you're a good person or a bad person. I don't know if you're smart or dumb. I don't know if you're

kind or cruel. I don't know if you're generous or selfish. I don't know if you're smart enough to figure out how to get your *'dick wet without having children.'* I don't know any of those things about you, Trappanggino. All I know is that you're wasting my time, and I don't have much of that to spare. So, why don't you stop wasting my time, and let me go back to doing whatever it is I do when I'm not on the phone with you?"

Trappanggino was silent for a moment, then he said:

"Nigga, you ever been in love?"

"I'm a man, Trappanggino, and I've been in love. Do you know what that means?"

"I know you got them court-e-sóns, Nauraingatang, but I mean *real* love, nigga."

"Real love," Naurain repeated, "that's a good word. There are a lot of kinds of love, but the one kind that's most important is the kind between a man and a woman. What's your name again... Trappanggino?"

"Trappanggino," he answered, "you *know* what my name is."

"Yes, Trappanggino, I know your name, yet you call me 'nigga.' I am not a 'nigger,' Trappanggino, I'm a man, like you. That's why I can tell you this: I know what it is to be in love. I've been in love with a woman named 'Leila' since I was nineteen years old. I still love her now. I always will."

"Nigga, I got kids now! I ain't love 'em, and they hate me! They formed a rap group, and they call themselves *'Trapnpongo.'* I don't know their names, I don't know their mothers, I just know there are three of them, and two of them is twins, and they just released an album. They talk about a bunch of different bullshit, but a pretty consistent theme is that I was an absent father and they gonna kill me. Maybe I do deserve to die, nigga, but I ain't never been in love like you. I done fucked, for sure; I fucked Japanese bitches, Native American bitches, Chinese girls, Mexican chicks, black chicks, white chicks, Indian ladies, French whores, German sluts, Spanish women, Russian hookers, *Italian* dames,—when they was still around—Swedish

babes, British hoes, and some Greek broads too. Shit, I even fucked me a girl from Ireland once."

Naurain was getting irritated. No, not irritated, he was getting disturbed. He did not know why Jack and Charlie gave his number to such a character as Trappanggino, but he had begun to suspect that it might be because the Brits were trying to make fun of him somehow. It was possible that they wanted to see if he could take it. He was a busy man, but his Oriental spite was preventing him from simply hanging up on this man. Besides, he was somewhat intrigued by this Trappanggino:

"I'll tell you what, Mr. Trappanggino," he said, "how about we engage in a correspondence? I will relate to you my woes and struggles as the de facto ruler of Aleppo, and you will relate to me your struggle with fatherhood."

There was a pause.

"Aight, nigga, sounds like a plan," Trappanggino said, finally, "what's yo address, so I can E-mail you?"

Naurain provided him with a fictional E-mail address which he would make actual later, not wishing to use his personal or governmental address in correspondence with this man.

Ending the phone call, he sat back and considered it awhile, as he made the new email account. He did not hate Trappanggino; it was quite possible he even liked him. Rather, he found himself strangely intrigued. It occurred to him suddenly that he should have asked Trappanggino more questions, particularly ones relating to his personal life. If he knew anything of Trappanggino's past, perhaps he could learn something useful; information which might prove helpful in dealing with the immigrant population of Africans who wished to profit from the city's rebuilding.

Ending his rumination, he looked down at his computer. Somehow, an email was already waiting for him, it read as follows: "Mista' Nourain,—I ain't never gonna call you master, nigga, and I'ma keep calling you 'nigga,' until you stop being mad—I got a lot of things on my mind right now, and I'd like somebody to bounce ideas off of. You ever been married, nigga?

Do you believe in God, mister? I heard the Pope died, and I wondered whether you thought that meant the end of religion altogether. Religion is so wacky. Me, I believe in spirits, that's what the Shoshone taught me. That's what the Shinto niggas taught me. Both taught me about vengeance. The spirit of vengeance. Eye for and Eye and you gonna die; that's what I learned, and that's what my progeny tryna' live by too. They gonna kill my ass. But I won't go out without a fight, nigga, not a physical fight, obviously,—I'm weak as fuck. I'm like, fuck, I don't know how old I am, but I know I got kids older than you, and I still ain't dead yet. Anyway, Trappanggino out. P.S. But you know, I bet I look younger than you."

It was several weeks before Trappanngino received a reply. His laptop—a rugged piece of equipment—worn down by many years of hard use, had gone belly-up, and he was forced to purchase a new machine. In the meantime, he spent hours upon hours reading newspapers from around the world, trying to find any tours involving Trapnpongo.

The new laptop dinged; an email:

"Mr. Trappanggino. You are a strange individual indeed. I do not understand why you wish to continue our correspondence. I cannot imagine what interest there may be in me personally, that you feel compelled to communicate to me. My life has little meaning, save only as it relates to the interests of those under my care. I have never had a child; I can only speak to my experience as one, which is—unless you are even stranger than you appear—something that is true for the both of us. I must confess, however, to some curiosity concerning the nature of your work. I assume that you are a scholar or professor of some kind. Indeed, you seem well read on matters pertaining to international affairs, although, I fail to comprehend why you should choose to spend your time writing about subjects which concern me not at all. The question arises in my mind, therefore, if this is merely an attempt to amuse yourself; amusement is a poor excuse for wasting valuable resources such as bandwidth and disk space. But, if it is amusement alone, then I fear that

you have chosen the wrong means to accomplish it. Perhaps you would prefer to compose a novel instead. There seems no harm in attempting to entertain oneself, after all. If, however, it is something else entirely that brings you here, then please tell me what it is. What does intrigue you so? Why do you seek me out in particular? Are you interested in my race, or in my profession perhaps,—which involves neither politics nor war necessarily, but simply the maintenance of order within the confines of my own domain? Is it because of the great number of African immigrants whom I employ, and the fact that these same men make up most of the city guard and police force? I am not a Christian. I am a Muslim. Islam teaches me that each man is responsible for his actions alone. And it tells me that when a person dies, he returns to the dust from whence he came. That is, unless he has sinned greatly against Allah, who will send him back into the earth again, and allow him to suffer eternal punishment. This is elsewhere known as "reaping and sowing," particularly among the Shona tribe. It is a concept with deep roots in the Shonto mythology, and the belief that a human soul is born anew every day, and that its fate lies wholly in the hands of the Creator. Ah, the Shona—a mighty people, a proud people. A people whose history stretches far beyond the borders of Africa. A thousand years ago, they ruled much of the continent, and were called the 'Great Kings of the Dark Continent.' But alas, that was long past, and the days of glory belong to others now. Their descendants will find success under my banner, the banner of a newly built Aleppo. Understand—Mr. Trappanggino—the fate of the Pope does not concern me. Just as your fate at the hands of old age, or your spurned issue, do not concern me. What makes you—who I know nothing about—think that I, a very busy man, a man of business, if you will, and if I may—will give any concern or thought to your affairs? Just who are you, and who do you think you are? I do not ask these question rhetorically, or out of anger; I ask, as always, in good faith, for I am a good, faithful man, a servant of Allah, and of the people under my charge. Good day."

Not an hour passed by before Naurain received a reply from Trappanggino:

"Nigga Naurain. Man, you thought I was a professor? Nigga, I'm an artist. Not the type of artist they give medicine to and are good at puzzles. I mean a real artist, the type that consumes the perfumes, the kind that looms, the kind that makes you think, the kind that makes you blink. I'm a songster, a poetaster, a rapper, a musician, and I ain't a servant to no God or Man, but I am apparently a slave to death, cause these Trapnponggo niggas tryna' kill me, and probably will... I been lookin' for a way to get away from them pimpz. You know how it goes: You start off just wanting to see the world, then you end up getting caught in some bullshit you didn't want to deal with. Well, nigga, they want me *dead*, and if I don't get away soon, they gonna get me for sure. I actually learned the names of my kids. The first two, the twins,—is named *Biko* and *Chaka*. I call them Bik and Chac, they half Chippewa. The third, their half-brother —who's also half-Japanese—is named *Chino*. He a punk. He a gangsta. He a pimp. He a drug dealer. He a killer. He a mack. He a soldier. He a thug. He a thug! He a thug! That's one of the reasons I love this guy, though; he a thug... I wish I could be a thug. I mean, I don't love him. I don't know him, but I'd rather be killed by a thug nigga, and I don't really wanna be a thug, because thugs ain't got nothing to live for, and that's exactly what I want to be, I got a whole lot of living left to do. I have a lot of life left to live, and I don't want them pimpz to take it from me. They keep sayin' shit like: "Fuck that father nigga, he ain't my father, nigga." But if that's true, why they calling me an absent father? Leave me alone! Right? I ain't never been a father, just an unwitting sperm donor. Shit, I'm actually a victim! Bitch stole my sperm! Nigga can you imagine getting your skeet stolen from you? I'm trying to figure out how to get away. I'm working on a plan. I hope it works. I hope I live. I hope I die in my sleep. I don't know. Trappanggino out."

Trappanggino sighed. He was a long way from home, wherever that was at this point in his life. Roaming the streets of

Lhasa,—the capital of the Tibetan Empire—he was strangely unaccompanied by his cadres and goons, as he was attempting to keep a low profile. He was banking on the hope that his children were not smart enough to know where Tibet was: "I know these niggas never seen a map," he muttered to himself.

Suddenly, something stopped him in his tracks,—a soft strumming sound emanating from the corner. Despite himself, he turned and found its source to be a beggar, strumming on a Dramyin.

"Goddamn nigga, that's a beautiful melody. What's it called?" He asked.

The beggar removed his hood, revealing a row of perfectly aligned teeth. It was Chino:

"It's the song of fatherhood... Father!"

Meanwhile, Naurain had just finished his last prayer for the day. He had returned to his study after a long day of administrating his estate, and feeling benevolent, he decided to follow up on Trappanggino's email. He paused, and then wrote:

"Trappanggino. Allah, the Lord of the worlds—in his infinite mercy—has strangely instilled in me the desire to help my fellow man (note that I did not say 'nigger,' for which I have reprimanded you before,) and thus I shall offer you my counsel. My advice is this: Come to terms with your status as their father. Beg for their forgiveness and accept the role Allah has thrust upon you. For Allah is present in all things, even in the 'Kami' that haunt your every step. I admit, there is nothing pleasant about the prospect of living for eternity with the latter-day Satan, but it must be done. This may sound arrogant, but it is my belief that all men have an innate ability to know what is right, what is wrong, what is true, and what is false. If we are capable of this, then we are capable of making changes for the better. No man ever has taken a bus to work and back and thought it novel to say: 'Damn the world.' We all know the world is damned, we live with it. We can, however, decide to do something about it. When I look into the eyes of a child suffering from an injustice, I am filled with an unstoppable, indescribable

energy. It is my desire to do everything I can to help the innocent. And so, in times of great need I will place my mind at the service of humanity. It is as Allah said: 'O Mankind! I am (as I am) with you, there is no salvation from Me, take refuge with Me in the fact that I am God, there is no God but I, you are Muslims, for I have made you, and you have misinterpreted me, obey me and do not forsake Me. O men! Turn (as much as you can) from evil and take to virtue, and do not forsake My word, and accept the punishment of God, for My Name is the greatest boon.' Naurain."

Naurain was about to sign off for the night, for he had dreaming to do, but, not a moment after he pressed the enter key, a reply popped up on his screen,—it read: "Nigga!!!!!!!!!! I!!!!!!!!III!!!!!"

Naurain sighed. He had to respond. He kept his reply brief, asking what the problem was, and after looking down to check if he had lint on his suit, he saw a reply:

"Naurain. Nigga, I'm in the Tibet. You wouldn't believe this fuckin' place. You won't believe this but your crazy advice is exactly what I needed! That's it! That's the manifesto that'll get me to Tibet and make me my fortune. I'm gonna transform this land into an insane and wacky place for everyone who has ever crossed over. We're gonna build a theme-park in Lhasa, with rides like: The Gravitational Well of Amazement, Epic Rap Battles on Mount Kailash, and free admission to the Palace of Perpetual Cheese, where guests can choose their favorite flavor, from liquid cheddar cheese bathing pools filled with kangaroos, hopping around yak butter sculptures. And then there's Ghandruk Valley,—home to Handlandia Park, a world of giant hands controlled by monks connected through telepathy. Visitors will ride hand held mine carts diving deep into caverns full of wild surreal creatures, until they reach an underground realm four miles below, populated by Yetis, creators behind every great invention since Stonehenge. Looking around I see Tibetan niggas chillin' and spittin' rhymes, Tibetan ladies speakin' in tongues while they wearing their awesome ensemble of medieval garb,

monasteries where spiritual beings transmute energy on the reg, rising misty mountains lined with caves filled with crystals, like Gilgamesh himself was chillin'. I can just feel an aura of power radiating around these sacred grounds! Not to mention all the political strife that's got this place partying; protest songs from radio waves heard from every city block, as brass players lead ragamuffins through cobblestone streets, chanting out loud for freedom every night at sundown. It's inspiring—in a real way—see? The people here don't let nothing stand between 'em and what's right,—nah mean? In Tibet, it ain't about no countries or governments limitatin' nobody: We live our lives according to faith and belief, first above all else. Niggas iced out in blingin' amulets, diamonds and pearls; yaks being ridden by goons with AK-47s strapped to their backs. Uncles shooting bamboo rockets into the sky as a celebration of life,—it's wild! In Lhasa I can browse the local marketplaces filled with colorful wares from silk scarves handmade by Tibetan artisans, or taste traditional cuisine made exclusively through yak-butter methods, used since nomadic times, before Buddhism spread around Asia several thousand years ago. And then there's Dalai Lama's residence, Potala Palace, where citizens gather to hear ancient prayers recited daily. I can hear the lilting syllables of Buddhist monks chantin' out loud, the sound echoing into the hills in harmony to this ancient paradise of enlightenment and harmony... Dude, this place is pretty incredible. Oh my God, the tombs of the Tibetan saints,—it's some of the best I've ever seen. Skulls are still shaped like warriors, diamond encrusted swords embedded into their thighs and chests, dead warrior's teeth mixed into their beards. There are skulls made entirely of mother of pearl, ornate temple statues hand crafted from more than ten-thousand pieces of ivory, stunning sand paintings that show yak activity of all sorts! Tibetans got niggas wavin' swords around like they all actually exist and it's all just a part of some lord of the ring or something. Ya know, like some Buddha legend. They even got skulls in glass cabinets and sarcophagi, one's actually buried in an ornate tomb with bodyguards as security

for his remains. Tibetan niggas fightin' over who's got a soul more righteous than the other, nah mean? They even fight for it when it come to their homes; there's people shit-talking on the internet that they have rights to their family jewels for sleeping with their wives and not paying the bills. You'd think they were talking about sports, ya holla? People wailing out loud: 'Don't you come between my family and my culture! What is it that you want, haha?'—No man, we're not here to sell you anything... Or is it: 'To sell your mother, father, mother-in-law, brother, sister and children into slavery?' It's a fucked up jungle out here in this part of the world. Tibetan niggas believe that the Living Karma of each human is based on their lifetimes of activity. The top twenty percent of the Tibetan population attains 'Nirvana,'—the highest level of salvation in Buddhism, but the average Tibetan is still stuck in a cycle of reincarnation where their future is determined by the souls of their past lives. Wanna hear some shit? The Dalai Lama himself is believed to be reincarnated from the Chinese Emperor Qin Shi Huang in the third century BC. Or, more conveniently: Reincarnated from a Tibetan courtier in the 12th century who hated China so much that they decided to raise him in another country. Some say he's literally a God... Ya' see, to Tibetans, the Dalai Lama is not the holiness of a guru, he's the ultimate secular deity, who may or may not be real. There is no belief system. Some Tibetans believe the Dalai Lama will return in the future, and that Tibetan leaders will: 'Be reincarnated into the body of the Dalai Lama, or the Dalai Lama will be reincarnated into our heads as God.' I mean, who can tell? Or in this case, who can't? Well, anyway, you get the picture. All that has some Tibetan niggas paranoid and the government knows it, so it tries to be involved in some of the beefs that Tibetans are having with their crazy religious sectarianism. It's definitely not all Xzibit and a fucking shrine to anything. So after the Dalai Lama dies and reincarnates, he'll bring the Tibetan culture into the next era. The entire planet will be dependent on Tibetans and they'll eventually destroy themselves in the process of God-gifting all of mankind.

The world will be reincarnated and the cycle of hate will start all over again. The rumor is that when he dies, a giant golden statue of him will come down out of the sky and throw the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama in. I mean, how fucking poetic. And by the way, nigga, I'm hiding in a fuckin' box; that Chino nigga found me. Trappanggino out."

Naurain squinted at the email. Was it a prank? A joke? An elaborate hoax? Just how unhinged was this Trappanggino character? He had been communicating with a complete stranger for weeks now, yet the e-mails were becoming more disturbing by the day. But what did it matter? He had taken upon himself the task of finding the "truth," whatever that meant, and he would continue to follow the trail wherever it led.

He opened a new tab. There it was again, a Google search for 'Trappanggino.' This time, the search results revealed another article, the headline read: *"Oldhead in the New World: Another Trite Release From an Aging Rapper."* The Article read as follows:

"It seems unfair to review a rap album when the rap vocals have yet to even appear on said album. That being said, it has been nearly half a year since Trappanggino's eponymous album was released, and I do use the word "released" as pejoratively as I can, as it was released much in the same way as a convicted rapist would be. Indeed, one of Trappanggino's songs on that album is chalk-full of disturbing acts of sexual violence. While I personally find this arousing, it is decidedly not in line with the alleged 'celebration of life' that Mr. Trappanggino describes his album as. Indeed, Trappanggino is to rap what bulldozers are to pavement. The instrumentals themselves can only be described as a musical menagerie of rampant cultural predation. And also a menagerie in the literal sense, as this 'man,' if we can truly call him that, samples literal elephant noises. He even samples a variety of video games, including System Shock 2, a former favorite of mine, now rendered unplayable due to the associations. As much as I hate this man, and hate his work, I must give him points for making me feel so strongly. In an ocean of

music that commands nothing but indifference, Trappanggino stands alone, with his shamisen and his washboard, which he oddly did not sample, but in fact played live in a studio. In fact, in an interview I read of him, he once mentioned that all the musical instruments on his album were played by hand, and indeed, the album does sound like it was recorded by a group of amateurs, or possibly by a group of people with autism. Indeed-"

Naurain could not bear to read any further, for it filled him with a sort of sick disgust that even he could not explain. He closed the tab and shut his computer off. He needed to sleep, as he had not gotten enough rest recently, and he was beginning to hallucinate. He hoped the dreams would be pleasant ones.

The next morning Naurain awoke early and began sipping coffee from the local shop. It had taken some time to build up a tolerance, but now the caffeine did not bother him so much. He decided to send Trappanggino a reply:

"Trappanggino. How do you have Wi-Fi in your box? I thought those things didn't work without the Internet. In any case, I do hope that this message will reach you in time. What is your son's intention? Why don't you take my advice and beg for forgiveness? What exactly made you go to Lhasa? I remember reading that Tibet used to be a place where one could lose oneself in nature and not have to worry about anyone else. Why then is it that you're living in a cube? Further, why do you insist on keeping yourself hidden from your children? Surely they deserve to know their father, despite the fact that you are a wretched person. In any case,—I have a few questions about Tibet: How many Aleppo refugees would you say have taken residence there? What is the state of the people? Are there any large protests against the Gelug Shcool? Can one even find Arabic speakers who aren't Muslims? I write these questions as a fellow traveler in the pursuit of truth, and I hope that you will answer them soon. I look forward to your reply. Naurain."

An hour or so passed and Trappanggino had replied:

"Naurain. Goddamn nigga. I'm currently in Thailand, which is pretty nice actually. It's nice and hot, and there are

plenty of beautiful women here. That Chino nigga got the drop on me, on Amaterasu, goddamn. He found my ass cowering in a box and started beating the shit out of me. I tried to fight back, but he had the advantage cuz I'm a weak motherfucker and I ain't never lifted weights, fuck weights nigga, weights is for white folk, and for them Chinese niggas too, I guess. I'm not getting weighed down by nothing nigga, and I don't need no weights, I just need something to hold up my backpack. That Chino nigga started talking shit, calling me a shitty father and saying that I was a coward and a fraud, and that I should kill myself and get it over with. Then he pulled out his gun and shot me right in the head... Bitch! I'm not dying because some bitch ass bullet hit me in the dome, or whatever the fuck you call that part of the skull. I'm gonna live forever, and haunt him, and I don't mean like a ghost, I mean really fucking haunt him!.. How did I survive? Well, I prayed to the Buddha, and the Buddha must've heard my prayer, cuz I woke up and the bullet was gone. But then I realized that I had been shot in the chest with a 9mm round, which is a lot smaller than a .45 caliber, so maybe my God is a pussy, or he's dead,—that's more likely. So, I guess Chino shot me in the chest, not the head. Come to think of it, I think I remember that nigga saying something as I lost consciousness, something like: 'I'm gonna let you run, nigga, I like the chase. There's three of us, nigga, we gonna kill your ass, but we gon' do it slow, I'm gonna make you suffer.' So, I'm alive, but I have a hole in my chest. I can't take a shower cuz water kills me, and I have to wear a bandage on my chest. Fuckin' hell nigga... Tibet? I said all I could about that place. I guess I can only add that if you ever go to Tibet: Don't eat the yak dung; it tastes bad, and it gives you diarrhea. I saw a few Syrian niggas, but they were all crazy. The men were all bald, and they wore robes; most of them smoked opium, or took hashish. Their women were skinny and they wore red dresses, and they would walk around naked at night. They also had these long hairless dogs, Aztec dogs, I think. I got a picture of one, maybe I'll send it to you. Anyway, Thailand is controlled entirely by

the Indonesians now, and they're getting ready to start another war. There are riots going on all over Bangkok. I hear that the Indonesian military has sent troops to occupy the city, and are threatening to burn it to the ground. So, probably not the best time for an old nigga to wander his way into a nearby village, which happens to go by the name of 'Thai Noodle City.' I'm not making this shit up. Nigga, it's not even a fucking city, it's a little town with a couple of noodle joints and a shitload of street vendors. I guess you can buy all kinds of food here, like fruit and insects, and snake meat. Anyway, I'm literally the only nigga in miles, so, I probably have to get moving before Chino or the twins Bik and Chac find me. On God, this reminds me of a hunting trip I once was on when I was living with the tribe of the Nez Perce Indians. We went hunting buffalo and we ran into a group of Scythian soldiers who was stationed in Montana. One of them asked me if I wanted to smoke some weed, and I was like: 'Sure, why not?' This dude, he was a little bit older than us, he didn't look like the other guys, he looked more like a real soldier, and he told us that he had come from Karelia, and that he was on his way to Vietnam, and that he was going to fight in the war. You see, at this time Vietnam was still a vassal state to the Empire of G. G-Gothicus, and so the Scythian soldiers were fighting for the Rebel Vietnamese against the Goths, and they were on their way to help out. Fuck, wait, that's the wrong story, I was actually thinking about the time I was living among the Lakota. I was with my niggas: Blue Mountain Bear, Red Leaf, and Foggy River. We were out stalking deer, just having fun, and then, suddenly, this big bear came crashing through the brush. I was scared shitless, but I just yelled to the others: 'I see a bear!' And they all turned toward the sound, and we saw the biggest motherfucking grizzly bear you have ever seen. I don't know what happened, but all of a sudden the bear charged right at us, and we jumped back, trying to get away. I saw that Red Leaf was holding something in his hand, so he threw it at the bear, and I couldn't believe it, the bear stopped, turned away, and started running from us. I re-

member Blue Mountain Bear shouting: 'That's the power of medicine, man! He's giving the bear medicine!' When we got back to camp later on that day, I asked Blue Mountain Bear what Red Leaf had done to make the bear leave us alone. He told me that he had prayed for us with a bundle of sagebrush in his hand. That's when I realized that we didn't have any medicine-men among us at that time. I still think about this story sometimes, when I'm walking along these empty roads that are so close to where people are fighting each other over land, or religion, or food, or whatnot. Sometimes when I'm walking along these empty roads, I wish that there were some medicine-men around, so that we could pray for world peace or something like that. But then again, maybe there is no medicine-men around 'cause we don't have any world peace anymore... But then again, maybe there is no world peace anymore because there are no medicine-men anymore either, 'cause there ain't no world peace anymore either... I mean, there are medicine-men, but there aren't *medicine-men*, na'mean? There's still medicine-men 'round, they just don't make albums or sing songs about being medicine-men, in strip joints or milk factories, besides myself... Fuck, what else do I know about being a medicine-man? What else would I know about being a medicine-man? Nothing, really, I'm just your average street nigga who makes music about it, 'cause that's my life. Medicine-men in these streets... Niggas don't even recognize me as such anymore, they think my name is 'Mackie Trappanggino,' or some shit like that, because they heard me on a song or whatever. I guess I'm just one of those niggas who can't live like a normal person anymore, 'cause I don't have a normal life anymore. My whole life I've been running from my past, from my real life... and I'll be goddamned if I'm not gonna keep running, 'cause, on God, FUCK DEM KIDS!!!!ıı! ı!!!!!! Trappanggino out."

Naurain finished reading and, after come consideration,—began forming his reply:

"Trappanggino. Tell me, do the Thai still hide themselves

away in the jungles, praying for the return of the Buddha? Why do the Thais worship the tiger? And how many tigers are there? When will the Tiger Nation rise up against the tyranny of the Indonesians? Have the Indonesian troops reached Bangkok yet? Are the Thai soldiers prepared for battle? Will they fight to defend the honor of the kingdom? Or will the King flee into exile, leaving his subjects to die under the guns of the enemy? And what of you, Trappanggino, what will you do, as a man who clearly does not care about consequences? Well, the consequences care about you, and you seem to understand that now. Will you finally beg for forgiveness? Or will you continue down the path of evil, until your soul has become a blackened husk? Your choice is yours, but, is it really? I have pondered this quandary of late. It seems to me that I am in two places at once. In my mind I travel through space and time, I see sights unseen, hear sounds unheard. I watch the stars wheel across the night sky, and I listen to the voices of the winds whisper secrets untold. I look upon the faces of my ancestors and I feel the touch of their spirits on mine; my body sleeps, but my spirit roams the earth, seeking answers to questions long forgotten. And I wonder: Where are they now? What have they seen since our last meeting? Did they pass peacefully, surrounded by loved ones? Or did they suffer the torment of illness or injury, alone and afraid? Are they here with me today? Are they watching? Or do they merely drift among the clouds, lost in a dreamworld of their own making, forever unaware of my presence? Wherever they may be, I hope that they find peace. The first thing I remember of my childhood, is the smell of exotic and luxurious perfumes mixed with that of war-ravaged corpses and charred flesh. It was an odor that defied description, a mixture of death, fear, despair, and hopelessness. I smelled it every day, in the form of smoke, ash, soot, and burnt human skin. I saw it too,—the dead lying where they had fallen, their wounds oozing pus, flies buzzing around their open mouths and gaping jaws. The stench of rotting flesh permeated everything, turning the air

itself into something foul. I could taste it when my mouth filled with dust and dirt. Even though we were only a few miles outside Damascus, I felt like we'd traveled back to the Dark Ages. As soon as I began to walk, I would follow my mother wherever she went. She didn't let me go anywhere without her supervision, which made sense given the circumstances. We lived in the heart of the city, within walking distance of most major landmarks. But the streets were still littered with debris, and there wasn't enough food to feed everyone. So, people stole what they needed from each other's homes and shops, and fought over it. They killed others simply because they happened to be in the wrong place at the right time... Until my father changed that. Aleppo became a beautiful city, much more than just a collection of buildings and monuments. There were no longer beggars lining the street corners, instead, there were doctors, lawyers, engineers, teachers, artists, musicians. Yes, musicians. Musicians who were more than just musicians: Mothers, *fathers*,—Trappangino—they did not see their craft or their art as a thing that was encroached on by their duties, their privileges as parents to the next generation. Their music was their life, and they dedicated themselves to its perfection, whether it came from their lips or fingertips. Now Aleppo is barely more than dust, but it shall rise yet again, more beautiful than before. It shall become a cosmopolis. I shall welcome all refugees, and give them the plow, the shovel, the hoe, the lute, the easel, the telescope; I shall not discriminate, I give not a care about their religion, their race, or their former country. Aleppo shall rise, and I shall call it home. As for you, Trappangino, you must choose between good and evil, or perhaps better said,—justice and injustice. Choose wisely, lest you fall prey to the devil himself, for the Lord Allah says: 'Do unto others as thou wilt.' Naurain."

Having sent the email, Naurain went out into his newly refurbished garden and meditated on the logistic of the possible return of some Aleppan refugees, who had ended up in Asia. Indeed, some of these people were originally taking refuge in Ottoman Turkey, before being whisked away eastwards by a

group of "peacekeepers" calling themselves the "United Nations." The next morning, now having eased well into the odd-rhythm of this correspondence, Naurain checked his email, and indeed, Trappanggino had sent his reply:

"Nouraingatan. Nigga, you ever see a nigger in a suit? You ain't never seen a nigga in a suit, 'cause we don't got shit. Niggers wearin' suits is white folks wearing black clothes. You know why? 'Cause they scared of us. That's how come you can get away with putting your ass in a suit. If we put ours in a suit, then that means you think we smart, huh? Well, fuck you niggas and your wack ass metrics of intelligence. I'ma tell you somethin': I might be dumb as a brick, but, I'll kill you quicker than you can say 'stupid.' When I was little, I used to live up in Gogland, way out in the woods, and my mama would send me off to school in town. Every morning I'd ride this bus down the highway, until it stopped at the edge of the forest, and I'd walk through these big ol' trees till I got to school. One time, I took the long route instead of taking the shortcut. When I finally stepped onto the sidewalk, I noticed that some dude was standing there, waiting for the bus. His hair hung real low and he wore glasses, kinda like those nerdy guys you always see on TV. This guy looked kind of familiar, but I couldn't figure out where I knew him from. As soon as our eyes met, the man started laughing hysterically! Then he pointed behind me and yelled: 'Hey nigga!' I turned around, and there stood this tall skinny kid who looked exactly like me. Except that his face was covered in acne scars, while mine has none. And I swear to God, this boy had the exact same pair of sneakers I had. The only difference was that he was dressed in a fancy suit. A shiny, silky suit. The kind of suit you see them old gangster niggas wear in the movies, ya holla? Anyway, we stared at each other for a few seconds. Something came over me nigga, I felt the Great Spirit come down into my arms and legs an' shit. I Looked that nigga in the eyes, and then I recited this poem at him:

Them bitches love me now, they hate me later.
But I don't give a fuck, cause I'm cool.
And they hatin',—so I could care less.
That's how I roll; it's my world.
My rules, so if you try to mess with me,
You're gonna end up dead.
Yeah, you heard right,—dead.
Just ask the rest of these fools,
They all died.
Oh, what a shame! Look at 'em go!
What a waste.
If they didn't want to die,
Then maybe they should've listened to me.
Let me explain something:
This ain't no game.
No, sir,—not even close.
You wanna play hardball?
Well, I guess we'll do it my way!

Anyway, the kid ran away in terror. That's when I realized I could be a rapper. Why did I tell you this story? Because it's relevant. You see, the first thing I thought after I saw the kid run away was: 'Damn, that nigga ugly.' And the second was: 'Man, I wish I had a suit too.' You have the suit, nigga. Don't be judging me. But to answer your questions: These Thai niggas patched my ass up, but now they want me to fight for them. Goddamn nigga, there's always a price: 'If you fuck me, you gotta take care of the kids! If we heal you, you gotta fight for us!' Nigga, fuck that, I never wanted any part of this bullshit anyway. But since I already agreed, I guess I'm stuck here... Peace. Trappanggino.

Naurain replied immediately:

"Trappangino. You should help the Thai. Your experience taught you that sometimes there are prices to be paid in life and, very often, those who have had a hand in supporting us should not be forgotten, when we need help again. Even if you never wanted part of this 'bullshit,'—they nursed you back to health, and now it is time for repayment. Although, I know your situa-

tion is complex, it can open up possibilities. It might seem like a heavy burden at first, but don't forget that something exciting awaits on the other side, once it's settled. Fighting for them could bring many rewards; justice served with respect banked from their appreciation, or perhaps even new opportunities, presented by them, which turn out lucrative objects down the line. Looking into what kind of support Thailand needs differs from person-to-person, as different people will require something else depending upon how much aid they require. However, some form of common thread links everyone together: Aiding disadvantaged children living impoverished lives, through donations towards schools and food provisions. (But you don't care about that, do you? Very well. Perhaps they will protect you from your three sons.) The most practical way to support them is smuggling. Smuggling these kids into a safe haven in Aleppo, where they have access to food and education, might be the solution to solve their suffering. It may sound dangerous, but its not as hard as it seems. First, find out information on the conditions of the Syrian refugees from Aleppo: What kind of documents are required for entry? Who needs to be bribed? And so on. Once that is sorted, then create a contact with drug and people smugglers who deal within that region, and inquire into prices and time scales. Ensure that all necessary parties get remunerated sufficiently. If you do this for me, I will grant you amnesty. I will make you a court bard, and I will protect your from your children. Do not be concerned about finances, as I have seen the state of your recent record sales. I will wire you the necessary amounts on an as-needed basis, as to ensure that the money is used as I have charged you. I will require photographic evidence, of course. And it is not that I do not trust you, Trappanggino, but rather that you do not seem to trust anything, perhaps even your own mind. May the Lord Allah keep you. Nourain."

Three weeks passed. Naurain had sent Trappanggino several payments, and did indeed receive confirmation that his funds were being utilized according to the agreement.

Due to the near collapse of the Thai banking system, Naurain had to send the funds through somewhat unusual and varied means, but nonetheless, everything seemed to be going according to plan. Then, one day, a concerning email manifested:

"Nourain. Nigga they found me. I managed to convince a bunch of Thai niggas and Syrians to escape with me to Aleppo, like you asked. But then Bik and Chak, accompanied by the Indonesian army, started pursuing us. When they caught up with me, they tied me up and beat the shit out of me. Bik and Chak, though, they didn't touch me, instead, those niggas just stood over me, saying nothing, gazing... considering... Then Bik sliced a gash on his forearm and started bleeding all over me, nigga. Then he and Chak uttered the following rap:

Come now and see the ritual that we do,
The blood rite we cast against our absent father, true.
We gather around the altar, this is all for you;
The dark magick, it will make us all anew.
Ritual blood rite, it's time to take flight,
This vengeance is ours, it's time to ignite,
We come together, our power's in sight;
Our absent father, we will not let him out of our sight.
We chant the incantations, the power starts to swell,
The fire burns brighter, the magick starts to tell.
We raise our hands and the force starts to flow,
A powerful energy that our absent father will know.
Ritual blood rite, it's time to take flight,
This vengeance is ours, it's time to ignite,
We come together, our power's in sight;
Our absent father, we will not let him out of our sight.
As we draw the blood, the power starts to rise,
Our absent father will feel the magick in disguise.
The ritual's complete, our power's been revealed;
The darkness binds us, and our vengeance is sealed!

The blood dripped down on me. Pretty sure these niggas gave me the AIDS... Anyway, the Thais barged in and attacked the Indonesian thug soldiers. They secured my black ass and the

last thing I saw before everything went dark was Bik, sneering. I knew I would see those niggas again. I've seen some fuckery, nigga, but this shit is next level. The Indonesian-Thai government has made it illegal for any foreigner to stay more than one month within the country, without permission. Too little too late nigga, because now there are a bunch of Thai niggas at your doorstep, ready to repopulate Aleppo. I gotta say, the Thais ain't bad looking either. You better hope you're worth enough to keep 'em there, nigga. Otherwise, they'll turn on you quick as a wink. So, yeah, thanks for getting me out of Thai Noodle City. The Thais are not actually Buddhists, oddly. Well, some of them are, but most of them actually practice a weird mix of Vodoun and Hindiuism. Their main god is a nigga named 'Shango.' He's a Voodoo god, basically. You see, about eight hunnid years ago, the great West African Empire of Benin had conquered the whole island chain between Madagascar and Indonesia. In exchange for the islands, the king of Benin sailed his way to Thailand and established a colony there. They brought their gods along with them. So, the Thai people still worship these strange foreign gods. It's fucking bizarre. And the descendant of the King of Benin, he's basically a traitor to his people, because he decided to side with the Indonesians. His son, who became the current king, is pretty much an asshole, but I guess he doesn't have a choice. Anyway, that's what happened to the Thais. You should probably look into it sometime. Maybe you could use the information somehow. Oh, also, the Thai language sounds exactly like Portuguese. Not kidding. Trappanggino out. P.S. There are two other groups of refugees coming from Bangkok right now, both going to Myanmar and Bangladesh. Looks like the Indonesians been facing unrest in the whole of Thailand."

Naurain responded as soon as possible:

"Trappanggino. AIDS was made treatable decades ago. Once you arrive in Aleppo you will be given proper treatment, though, I doubt that you have in fact contracted the disease from the bizarre ritual you have described. This reminds me of

the time I was swallowed by a fish. My friend and I were swimming near a small village where some fishermen lived. We swam under water for a long time until we came upon a school of large catfish. They were very beautiful and graceful creatures. One of the larger ones noticed us and began circling around. Soon after, another followed suit. As if sensing danger, the others scattered. However, the first big catfish continued to circle us menacingly. Suddenly, it lunged forward, opened its mouth wide and engulfed me headfirst. When it finally released me, I felt dizzy and sick. I thought I was dying. Then, suddenly, it struck me: The fish had just saved my life. Had it not acted so swiftly, I would surely have drowned. Now, whenever I am afraid or worried, I think back to that day. I remember how lucky I was and realize that luck is always there for those who need it. Luck may not give you everything, but she can certainly help you survive. I always carry around my neck the fossilized scale of a catfish, to remind me of that day. Allah, peace be upon him, says in Surah al-Mulk (2): 214: 'And if among men there is he whose conversation is pleasant to your hearing, then follow him.' Follow such people. For indeed, the best companions are those whom we find pleasing to our ears. I find you vile, Trappanggino; you are a man who hardly deserves a second chance. Yet, I see in you an artistic soul that few can match. If only you could harness your talents. But alas, I fear it will never happen. Your spiritual brother, Naurain.

Jack & Charlie Talk About Their Projects and Plans. Cap. II.

QUaintly, Jack was sitting in a deep arm-chair before the fire, while smoking a cigar. On the mantelpiece, above the mantel, was a heavy clock. Charlie was standing by the mantel, holding a can of beer in one hand, and holding out a hand to Jack, as if expecting to receive a cigar with the other. Jack, reclining in his arm-chair, was holding a sheet of paper in his left hand, upon which, written in a neat clear hand,—were

the letters "C.T.R." on top and "Z.W.B." on the bottom, underlined twice.

"I'm working on a new manuscript," said Jack.

"You're writing a new manuscript?" Charlie inquired.

"Yes, it's called: 'A Victorian Testament.' "

"A Victorian Testament! That's very interesting, Jack, I am interested."

"It's about my own ancestor, *Benjamin*, who died under an apple tree, after being bitten by a rattlesnake, in 1658. He was shot by his drunken mother."

"When did you start working on the manuscript?"

"Last year."

"It's going to be a best seller," said Charlie, holding out his can of beer, "you know how these things are, once the public gets to hear about them; it won't be long now before the newspapers start describing Benjamin's last moments, the way the newspapers did when my great-great-great grandfather was shot in a duel by a Manchu in China, with a capsicum powder bullet."

Charlie took a sip of his beer. He did not appear to have much taste for beer, but he drank it as if he had to, until the whole can was empty. He sat himself down at the sofa opposite of Jack and started smoking from the hookah on the coffee table.

Jack, taking a long drag from his cigarette, continued:

"You know, Benjamin was a pretty remarkable man,"

"Oh?"

"I guess you have to be a pretty remarkable man if you're going to be bitten by a rattlesnake."

"Come on, that's not so remarkable. What was so remarkable about him, really?"

"Well," said Jack, "he was born in a very strange way."

"How so?"

"Well, when he was born he stopped breathing and the midwife gave him an alcohol infusion."

"Alcohol infusion!"

"Yes. But that's not all. See, he was born in a very unusual position. I mean, he wasn't quite flat on his back, but he was

closer to the back of his head than to his feet. His hands were folded over his belly, and his feet were wrapped up in string."

"Oh..."

"When Benjamin was born, his relatives all gathered around the midwife, looking at him and wondering what they had done to bring such a strange child into the world. The midwife, a kindhearted woman, tried to reassure them that there was nothing strange about his birth."

"What did she say?" Charlie inquired.

"That he had been born in such a way, because his ancestors from the Maha Radhuni dynasty, were good Buddhists."

"Oh, sounds auspicious."

"But," Jack continued, "as soon as she finished speaking, her mind went blank. She had heard an idea which she could not recall. It was gone. It had vanished into the ether. It was like trying to remember a song from before you were born."

"What song?"

"The song of the Buddha."

"I see..."

"She tried to find the thought again, but it wasn't there. And then, just when she thought she would go mad, a thought flashed across her mind."

"Yes?"

"Yes, the thought was this..."

Jack fiddled with his lighter and the flame from the lighter's tip lit up the end of Charlie's hookah. A steady stream of smoke poured out of the hookah's nozzle.

"It seemed so simple," said Jack, "it seemed to make perfect sense, although I doubt most of them would agree with me."

"Okay."

" 'One of your ancestors' the midwife told them, 'bears the same name as the Buddha.' "

"Yeah?"

"She said that Benjamin Kondo must be a reincarnation of Buddha himself."

"Okay."

"And so they asked questions."

"What questions?"

"Well, a lot of people in the room wanted to know if they could ask the midwife to verify that Benjamin was Buddha. But she wouldn't do that, saying that that was impossible. All she would say is: 'Your great-great-great grandfather, who lived on that very spot in Maha Radhuni Dynasty in the year 1209 AD, bore a name very similar to the Buddha's: *Gautama Binakas.* He was born in the middle of a tree with a lighted lantern between his legs.' "

"A lantern between his legs?"

"Exactly."

"What the hell's a lantern doing between his legs?"

"Exactly. So, although the situation was quite strange, everyone did not immediately question the strange birth."

"Why didn't they?"

"They asked a lot of questions, sure, but the birth was witnessed by a handful of the relatives. They all believed that Benjamin must be Buddha. It was not until he died that the truth began to dawn on most of the family."

"What truth?"

"That Benjamin Kondo was not in fact a reincarnation of Buddha, but of a fake Buddha, who lived in 1545 in Italy."

"A fake Buddha?"

"Yes."

"And how did they figure that out?"

"Oh, by comparing his life to another fake Buddha, who was also born in 1545."

"A fake Buddha who lived in the 1500s in Italy?"

"That's right."

"And what's the fake Buddha's name?"

"His name was Barradello de Bambal and he had been born in the foothills of the Alps in Italy."

"Oh, yes," said Charlie, "I've read about this man. He once sold his soul to Satan for one thousand guineas."

"Yes, that's him. Apparently, this Barradello took the thousand guineas and then declared his soul was worthless, and then became a mercenary. He eventually wound up in South America where he was introduced to shamanism-"

"Which caused him to have a change of heart," Charlie cut in, "and return to Buddhism, and to renounce Satan, and to drink yerba mate until he became so hyperactive, that he thought he reached Nirvana, and then thought he was Buddha, and then realized that he wasn't and just became incredibly rich." Charlie paused, and then continued: "So, besides the circumstances of his birth and death, what was really so remarkable about Benjamin?"

"Well, apart from the fact that he was lying, deceiving, cheating and stealing for money all his life, he became a known for his art. He painted. He was a successful businessman. He even invented a new kind of oil paint. He was smart, good-looking, rich, powerful and had no sexual issues."

Charlie nodded.

They sat in silence for a while. Then, Jack asked between puffs of smoke:

"What about you, dear Charlie? What have you been working on lately?"

"Oh, well, lately it's been easy things, you know, sewing clothes for my wife and that. But recently I decided I wanted to start taking on more artistic projects, you know, looking at things from a different angle, that sort of thing."

Jack nodded: "I understand."

"Well, I have been working on a piece called 'View From Heaven.' "

"That sounds impressive."

"I worked out a few things I wanted to show from a different perspective. The basic idea is that the universe as we know it is just an illusion. What's really out there is a vast ocean of nothing. We can never go up to the 'sky' to see what the view from that is. But this sounds impossible doesn't it?"

"It is," Jack agreed.

"So, what I want to show is that the universe is just as confusing and annoying as we think it is. In other words, it's just as hard to believe as we all think it is. I have spent the last couple of months working on this piece and have come up with some interesting revelations, but I think it's too early to show you anything yet. I'm going to need some more ideas."

"What are your main points?"

"Well, I have been working on the background design for the piece. I want it to have three parts."

"That sounds like a good idea."

"Part one: You see me from outside the space-time continuum. Your window is open. I am actually looking at you right now, sitting on your couch."

"What's the second part?" Jack asked.

"That's easy: You see me as if I were looking down on your neighborhood, on Earth, in the present day, from the roof of a tenement building, sitting on a bench, just outside the window."

"That's rather depressing. And what's the third part?"

"Well, when you look down on the world, you see what it is like from the point of view of every single person in the world. The biggest problem is there are so many people on Earth, so many trees, so much water, so much air, but yet there's so little of it. It's really very upsetting to see the bad we humans do to each other and the planet we live on."

"Charlie, you are on a really good path."

"Well, when you put it like that, I guess you're right. But, how can I put it any better?"

"What do you think?"

"Ah-ha! When I look at you, sitting there with your airy head and your serene smile, I just get this feeling that I'm not alone in this great big world. That there's someone watching everything we do. And just sitting there, alone, it's like there's nobody around. We're really alone."

"That's kind of a scary thought."

"Well, that's exactly what I wanted to express. If there is anyone around, it's you."

Jack nodded: "That's why it's so important for you to be part of the work."

"It's going to be an experimental film. You'll see, it's going to be like no other I've done. It's going to be unique, unexpected. You'll think you're watching a regular movie, but you'll see things differently. You'll see what I see. It's going to start with a Dutch angle on a tent and culminate with a desperate person about to jump off a building in Hanoi, after finding out they don't have air-conditioning in their apartment."

"That sounds like fun."

"Of course, I could be wrong. It's entirely possible that you will not like it at all, Jack, or at least not like it as much as you think you will."

"Well, I plan on enjoying it, and I really like your ideas. I know it's still pretty early in the process, but I'm really looking forward to seeing it. And I like the Dutch angle idea. Dutch angles are so maligned, but they make so much sense when it comes to distance from the viewer. It looks from the outside as if the person in the chair is in a moving diorama, flying around in space, looking down on the world."

"Yes, and just think what the Dutch angle might do if I did it right. If I did a right Dutch angle, it might actually take you out of the world and put you into an alternate universe. I just have to figure out how to do it, and if I figure out how to do it, it will look like it's rotating around you and me."

"That's amazing. So, when do you think you'll be ready for this movie?"

"I don't know. I know that there's a lot of work to be done. But I've got to do it by this summer. I don't have a lot of time."

"What do you mean?"

"I need to start casting. I need to cast about a hundred parts. I have to meet with a lot of people, and meet with a lot of producers, and shoot a lot of footage. And then I need to write the script, and shoot—a lot of shooting—and edit it. If I can do that, and do it by this summer, I'll be really happy. And I'm going to do it my way, Jack; no one else can do it."

"So you're going to do it by yourself for the most part?"

"Well, it's going to be an experimental film. I'm going to do the very best I can. But I have to do it my way."

Jack smiled:

"In that case, just make sure you don't fall down."

"Jack, you've never been one for movies,—which is perfect. The best audience is the least informed one, in my opinion. So I want you to be at the first screening."

"I'd be honored."

"And, who knows, if this is successful, maybe I'll film an adaptation of your book."

Jack nodded.

The two of them sat back, sipping their beers. The sun was beginning to set over the hills, and Jack suddenly saw what appeared to be a shimmering in the air. He squinted and then looked again, and it was still there.

Jack & Charlie go to the Gym. Cap. III.

During their downtime, Jack and Charlie were reposed in Jack's understudy.

Jack was thinking out loud: "Hey Charlie, is it true that if I exercise enough I'll get wings?"

"No Jack, that's from Red Bull"

"What's *'red-bull,'* Charlie?"

"I think its from the Bible, Jack. Anyway, what's this about exercise, we're both in great shape," he paused for a moment, "well, I'll tell you this, you have some kind of shape, but its like the shape of a twig,—a twig is a shape right? Or is it like a branch? I guess its more like a line; which means you're not in shape, you're in good line!"

Jack pondered this for a moment. He began to wonder where his shape came from.

"What are you thinking about Jack?" Charlie asked.

Jack answered with a big smile:

"I'm thinking about my shape."

Charlie looked at him, somberly, and said:

"The shape of a man is tantamount to his character."

"You don't say?"

"Yes, Jack, I do. Now stop thinking about your shape and let me finish my sentence. The shape of a man is tantamount to his character. If he has no shape then he has no character. And, if he does have shape, then he may have character, because he knows how to use it."

Jack shook his head: "I've never heard anything so ridiculous in all my life. But, I must admit, you make quite an argument. Tell me though, where did you learn these things?"

"My dad used to say them when I was growing up."

"Did your dad take you to the gym? Did he teach you to lift weights?"

"No, he didn't."

"Then, where did you learn to lift weights? Who was it that taught you to exercise?"

"I learned brawn from my mother. She always said that a person without muscle is like a bird without feathers. That they would be nothing but skin and bone with no substance."

"That's true," Jack agreed, "I kind of wanna go to the gym, Charlie. Are there any good gyms nearby?"

"I don't know Jack. I've never been to a gym."

"You mean you haven't ever gone to a gym before? What kind of shape is that?"

"I guess it's just the shape of a person who has never been to a gym."

"You're lying"

"Yes. I am. But that's just the shape of me, isn't it?"

They arrived at the gym, a big building on the outskirts of town. They had to drive. A neon sign of a bodybuilder in mid-routine, was in the building's front window, as well as its name: *The Pumping Irongym.*

It's exact location was revealed by its street address: Number 90000. Charlie had memorized it.

Charlie knocked on the door, which was opened by a big man in sweats, who seemed to be the bulkiest one they had ever

seen. He said nothing, but just jerked his head towards a room on the right.

Moving through an empty space, they entered and closed the door behind them. There were two other men in there, still wearing their sweatpants, but with tank tops, showing muscles underneath.

The biggest one spoke:

"Greetynges, freendes at the pumphouse of iron, we be assemble'd here to make strong our bodie, to strengthene our bodies and improuve our physical shappe wyth vartouse and sundrye exersyzes." He then lifted a dumbbell as big as a boulder in each hand, continuing: "Let us gayne from this exercise not onely strength of body but also morall fortitudee, because if thy have noe wight nor witnesse withinne themselver's armes than all their feates shall be void."

The other two men looked impressed by his speech; Jack especially could feel the impact of his words on him. He began thinking about how he wanted to make changes for himself, changes that wouldn't just expand upon what was already there, but would bring about an entirely new outlook on life, based solely on being active and healthy, and not anything else that could distract him from such aims.

He took a deep breath, he knew that this was his opportunity to transform himself. He could feel the energy from everyone present in the room, and it made him excited to start exercising again.

The big man next passed out paper cups with protein shakes inside them, then encouraged everyone to drink up before beginning their workout regimen for the day.

Jack gulped down every bit of his shake. After all, why worry about tomorrow, when you're living today? With that thought in mind Jack walked onto the treadmill with renewed vigor, while Charlie followed suit on an elliptical machine nearby.

Then, Jack and Charlie began to work out. They did the following exercises: Pull-ups (with dumbbells,) squats, push-ups, jumping jacks, sit-ups, shoulder presses, leg-lifts, crunches, dips,

burpees, wall-sits, plank-holds, lunges, and many others, such as barbell rows, and so on.

After they felt sufficiently tired, they decided to take a break.

"So what do you think, Jack?" Charlie said between sips of his protein shake, "did we make a good choice here?"

"I don't know, Charlie,—I feel like I've never worked out harder in my life."

"That's because you haven't, and it feels great."

"You know what else feels great? This shake!"

"Yeah, it does taſte pretty good. I'm glad we came here inſtead of going to another gym."

"Me too, I want more of those protein drinks though," Jack said, as he downed the reſt of his shake.

They returned to their workout. Jack was ſtruggling with the snatch grip high pulls, but Charlie growled: "Heave-ho, and away!" As he completed ten of them, perfectly.

Jack kept trying, until, finally, he managed to get one done.

"Woah!" Jack exclaimed, "what happened?!"

Charlie laughed.

"You got ſtronger, didn't ya? Now come on, let's finish off these laſt few sets."

They finished their workouts, feeling energized and refreshed, after having taken a short break.

While they reſted between sets, they decided to socialize with the gym-goers. They spotted one man, who introduced himself as 'Mason.'

Mason, his beaded sweat tracing down his ruddy face, ceased his caliſthenics and quaffed a cup of protein shake: "Noe doubte that ye be new. Pray, what brought yee hither?" He asked, leaning on the side of his treadmill and drinking a cup of protein shake.

"Uh.. oh, this and that. Being healthy and ſtuff, I guess. You?" Jack asked.

"Ye, meridian labore," Mason said, his apron ſtill tucked in his trousers.

Charlie smiled.

"Yeah, me too. Been wanting to come here for a while now," Charlie said, lying effortlessly.

Mason was casually doing concentration curls as he spoke:

"Verily, life is a queſtion of choyces. For sume folk 'tis labor, an' then a plesaunt repaſte aftwards; and for other 'tis labor and then meates deleterious. For certayne it be doynge preacher curles, and for other it be not doynge preacher curles, and so forth. If thou be not exercisynge, thou art not truly lyvynge life, doſt thou not perceyve? Tel me, what availment be there in life if it not envolve doynge cable crossovers, bockelbel snatces, and racke pulleys? what boote there be in life if it not dedycate to trappe barne overhede presse and olympyc ſtile boxe jumpe?"

"I think I underſtand what you're saying," said Jack.

"Yea, forye yonder world o'er charged be with warres and politicke, with fals nouz and suche toyes, the common man sholde not waſte hys tyme on them. Liffe is of Liffe it selfe; not of the fulleſte liffing, yet truly liffing. Yea muſt move, ſtrech, ſteppe, sqwatt, exercise and make hys herte pumpe; a way to gette a wourkout in the midſt of his everday liffe; to be more then what he bee."

"And what is that?" Asked Charlie, "being juſt one big average guy with nothing to look forward to in life?"

"Nay, for to beginne, that is not sooth. Thou art but a mightie averageman with much to hope for in thy life. God hath given thee a second chaunce at life! And I have as well. So I shalle let thee in on a secreit. Thou haſt God on thy syde. A freend of mine, Joseph Pomeroy, is the preeſt here in Dusbury. 'Tis a man of fiftie yeres. He was ones an owtbrought, yet no longer be he so. He done loſt it when his doghter, of fourteene yeres, did perishe by a drunken drover's hande, morded by the wheele. Near nyne yeres paſte it dide occurre. Even with all his paine and suffringe, he kept his faith in God, even through his woefull griefe. In his booke, 'The Crosse,' he writ some thing I think is passing faire..."

He cleared his throat, and continued:

"Whilom, in his doleful doying, God did sen him one mis-

sive from his leef-dauter sweete, a poeme most ennobling. Oft in wordes mellifluous, Lo! It was this:

I am frightened by all that I see,
Shaken by the lightning that lights up the sky,
Betrayed by the blame of others.
Yes, in the deepest hour of my life,
My Heavenly Father has looked down,
And laid on my heart these simple words:
I see your suffering, and I am ashamed,
That my love for you is so small."

Mason began to weep. He turned away and started doing press-ups. Then, Jack and Charlie heard a familiar voice:

"Nigga, that shit is so wack..."

Jack and Charlie turned,—it was Trappanggino, an eclectic musician and rapper of whose music Jack was quite fond of. They had met him before, after attending one of his concerts in England.

"Mr. 'Gino!" Jack exclaimed.

"Oh no..." Charlie muttered under his breath.

"Did you also come here to 'develope your sinews?' " Jack inquired.

Trappanggino laughed without mirth:

"Me? Nah dawg, I come here to have a wash. I declare war on anyone tyrina' better themselves; fuck that shit... The next person I ever see there shud be a full size hole in they face, dawg. You feel me? Where your honor, you, nigga?"

He paused for a moment and looked at the floor:

"I seen some nigga on that shit was sayan' he was e-nuff of bitches and hoes and he was lovin' his kids and shit. HE NEED TO FUCKIN' EXPLAIN THAT SHIT WHEN I SEE HIM!.. Yea, niggas gangsta' when their pistol laid low but still smokin' off ass 'n titties."

Trappanggino spat and walked past them into the weights room. The sound of his feet clanging the weights could be heard for several seconds.

"Son of a b-" Charlie swore under his breath.

Trappanggino started pacing:

"I saw that BITCH son of a bitch nigga, I'm gonna kill a nigga on this shit. Where he at? Let me get at that hoe ass nigga, what you say? Gloatin' bout his newfound religion, o YEA?! Shudn't get him while he wears his cross and shit, I'll get the nigga... I'll get him when his heart is weak and the money is silk!"

"Uh... did you have something you wanted to talk to us about?" Jack asked.

"D-don't play with me, YOU DOG! GET TO THE POINT! WHAT MY NIGGA SAID; that I was gon' shoot up a school full of kikis in little white skirts and asses. YOU KNOW WHAT I SAY TO THAT!?"

Trappanggino raised his pistol and fired two shots into the air.

Among the clanging of the weights, no one paid any mind.

"Uh... Trappanggino, is everything hunky-dory?" Said an apparently concerned Charlie.

"Listen mayne, I been trippin' off a rare chemical compound that is messing with my brain. D-dawg I'm more hopped up and surgin' with anger than your lil wicky. I CAN ODIE NUTS, WHAT'S GOOD!?"

Charlie listened, but all he heard was:

"O-die nuts, what's good?"

Jack continued trying to talk to him:

"Don't you have some sort of existential crisis, or something; that you need to work through?"

"I AM SHOOTING UP A KEYBOARD RIGHT NOW! DON'T TOY WITH ME, YOU WHITE NIGGA! I enjoy so slayin' a foo sayin' his kids are on some school but really is just playin' 'em like a stanina' can granpa' playa' sayin' a grand daughter same different fat girl. You see dollar signs in they eyes and then itz fist fight time!"

Trappanggino ranted on in erratic spurts. Jack was getting a bit worried. Trappanggino continued:

"E'rebody think they big in dis bih. Naw nigga, they ain't know what big is. Biggest cat I ever done seen was *Zack Savage*."

"Oh no," Charlie again huffed under his breath.

Jack and Charlie sat down on the benches by Trappanggino.

"We've spoken about this individual before," Jack said, "but I don't believe any connection to physical size was ever made Mr. 'Gino. Would you care to explain?"

"Zack Savage..." Trappanggino continued, "now, to explain this imma' need to go from the top, das from the beginning. Which is confusing 'cause usually in the game you start at the bottom to get to the top, but whatever.... So, anyway, afta' God shot his colt .45 and the world was creatafied,—*Zack was there.*"

"But, Trappanggino," Charlie protested, "you're not even a Christian!"

"Yeah nigga, so? Anyway; Y'see, Zack was was not the first man, 'cause he ain't no man, and I don't say this 'cause he got 'savage' in his name. And I'm not testing the niggas manhood, even though the way he dress kinda' suspect, y'see he got this thing, like... like a bra or something. Anyway,—point is nigga, he was *unmanifest*, so he ain't the first nigga around, that was Adam, the founder of National Geographic, on account he was born knowing the names of all the animals. So while Adam was namin' the animals and Eve was made from that nigga rib, God had this place, it was like... the first tiki bar; real good ambiance, they had, like, puffer fish hanging from the ceiling and shit. And oh man, mixology was so advanced back then, and mista' Savage was cultivating good vibes in a hammock, when this serpent mothafuka' came in talking all kinds of shit. Now back then dis nigga wasn't crawling on he belly, God did this shit to him afta' he made the first bitch-nigga move in history, by bamboozling Eve into eating from the wrong side of a tree. After this shit happen, Adam done come to the tiki bar, and Zack told him: 'Man, why'd you have to go an' do this, look at this mai-tai, we got mixology so advanced, yet you choose to eat bitch-food, nigga, what the fuck is wrong with you?' Adam could not answer, he was kicked out of Eden with his hoe, and they roam the earth."

"How long ago was this?" Charlie asked.

"I don't know, like about three or five years ago, nigga. Anyway, back to story: So, the first nigga to methlatize amphetmamines was dis dude called *Methuselah*; das why the process named after him. Now, dis shit was mad popular in heaven, 'cause God was sad dat his mens, his main dood ate that bitch-food, like damn, how he go an' do dat? Dis why God flooded he descendants, but, after the methamphetamine binge, he change he mind, so since he knew how to make a bomb ass tiki bar. He taught this nigga named Noah how to build one so he could survive the flood, but dude fucked it up and made the first boat in history. You can't make this shit up man!"

"I don't know Mr. 'Gino," said Jack, "this sounds a little apocryphal."

"Nigga, if I knew what that meant, I would still be insulted. Anyway, let me go on with the damn story!.. So, yeah, after the flood, Zack came down to earthly realm to check up on Adam, 'cause he knew dat nigga never do no good, but then he saw his wretched ass keeds killin' on each otha' with jaw bones and shit, and then *Enoch*,—the first nigga to take a selfie with God—was like: 'Bruh this shit ain't right." And God was like: 'Damn you the only real nigga left, imma' make you my lieutenant, you gon' sit right beside me nigga, an' imma' give you a new name, a gang name: *'MetaStrong,'* 'cause meta in the Greek mean, like, *beyond*, and strong mean like, *strong*,—so it mean you beyond strong, like the hardest nigga.' Anyway, he's now a published author with two books, the fans of these beef with each other, though. Just like Adam blood beef with Adam blood, like I was sayin'. So after Cain was murderized by Abel, and then Adam and Eve was like: 'Fuck, now we got to make anotha' one.' And then they gave birth to dis nigga name *Seth*; yes, that nigga dat made the Pyramids, and get this, he started beefing on his brother Osiris! And his cousin Osiris the Great went on to conquer Persia. Anyway, it's like these niggas can't stop killin' on each other!.. But where Zack Savage in all this? On his hammock, where else? Nigga was too damn comfortable, you ain't never seen a man dis comfortable, dude was cultivating all kinds

of good vibes. But you see, Satan—now I'll talk about him in detail later—God started trusting on dis nigga, 'cause he done proved to him that dis other nigga *Job* wasn't slick like God thought he was, after he deprived him of everything good in life, but left him with his bitch. So, dis Satan nigga had what was the first recorded case of male pattern baldness, even though he was a spirit creature. And get this, dude had no nose! Like he had two slits there, but like no nostrils! Anyway, dis Satan mothafucka', he invented the concept of money, which was later discovered to be the root of all evil, 'cause he discovered it, and turns out, nigga,—he was evil! Like, the first evil dude, like he make that shit like they print money or something... Anyway, first they started charging peoples for they drinks at the tiki bar, and Zack—being a real ass dood—got a job at the tiki bar, as a bouncer, but like, what dis meant in practice is that he just moved his hammock closer to the entry door. Now, he was cool with this, his style wasn't getting cramped on. But then that crafty devil Satan invented anotha' concept,—they called it *'rent.'* Now, Zack only left heaven because there was too many damn circular contradictions in the fledgling economic system, not because he was lazy or nothin'. You see, there's a difference between being comfortable and lazy... So yeah, God was like: 'Zack, don't go, nigga!' and Zack was like: 'Aight.' But then God, seeing dis nigga agree so quickly, got real mad and cast dude out of heaven. And ever since, Zack strive to live up to his last name, and be the most savage nigga in the universe... He went to dis planet, or maybe like a moon, 'cause there was anotha' bigga' planet it was going around, today they call it Vunes, I think, like the goddess the cavemen was strokin' it to. Or, like, the house-plant... I don't remember. Anyway, he established the *Republic of Niggeristan*. But dig this,—he wasn't elected, he was *selected*, naturally, unlike that shit that nigga Chuck Darwin done found out. You see, when he was studying barnacles, 'cause they was confusing him, he realized they wasn't natty, not in the slightest! This was the first case of unnatural selection, and this how he invented the steroid. Anyway, Zack ruled

Niggeristan for some time. Then he sent out his seed across the galaxy. You see, Zack Savage's descendants discovered civilization, and then proceeded to brutalize it,—becoming kings an' shit, taxin' the poor peoples fo' their grain an' grits... They was giants back in those days..."

Trappanggino paused and lowered his eyes somberly.

"Wow Trappanggino," said Charlie, "this Zack Savage fellow sounds awfully threatening!"

"Naw nigga, he wouldn't hurt a fly, but anyway: Afta' some generations, he could sense that his seed-descendants on the Earth was weakened by mixing with the bitch-made blood of Adam, so, he done leaped to the Earth to find the strongest of his kin. Now imma' go into the genealogy right now: There was *Zachariah Savage*, now he not Zack's biological grandfather, but he look so old that he kind of took up that role; so, on Earth das Zack grandfatha'. Now *Zariah Savage*, she his motha', but being that dis nigga was unmanifested, she just kinda' his motha' 'cause she dark on him, but he don't beat her up for some reason. There was also an adopted cousin, *Black Savage*. Now don't get it twisted, they call him black because he was born in a black crib, like an actual crib."

"But Mr. 'Gino," Charlie protested, "babies are born in hospitals, they sleep in cribs!"

"Nigga, shut the fuck up and let me tell the story!.. So, yeah, he African, dis unrelated though, it's just the naming customs. Like, Zachary is the biggest savage I ever known, but he ain't no racist, and that's for damn sure!" Trappangino turned to Jack, extending his neck as much as that was actually possible for him, and said: "Are you a racist, nigga?" He retracted back to his initial position and continued with the story: "So anyway, you see, they formed a team, a family, and family thicker than water, ya heard? Das why it sink to the bottom."

"What about your family, Mr. Trappanggino?" Jack asked.

"My family lighter than air nigga... Anyway, Zack and his fam went hard on dis planet, people say shit like going 'balls to the walls,' but what they don't understand is that there is four

walls in any given room. You ever seen a two walled room nigga? Huh? Thought so... And if you play baseball,—which I hope to God you don't!—Then you would know that a nigga with four balls can not walk! But, anyway, they dun failed to elevate the descendants of Adam to sapience, straight up man, they gave up. Zack went back to Niggeristan, where he in his hammock to dis day, amen..."

"Trappanggino, was a word that true?" Charlie inquired

"Does it matter nigga..." Trappanggino said, hunching down somberly, "it's only the fate of your eternal soul..."

A small crowd had gathered around the three of them. Mason was outraged, he began reciting the doctrine and teaching according to the Anglican Church:

"Bifore mannus were wreten, a myghty force known as The Chronicles ran thru a right grete yerthe of sterres and planetes. God, a liche lorde that transcendit time and space, brout fourth lijt fro derkness bi makynge mannus in His awne ymage. He saugh potentiall for greetnesse gif His wrightynge wolde truste Him, so He offred hem the yift of free-wille. Thus bigan a jorney of govin knowledge, wisdome, and gidance to Adam, the firste mannus wreten in His ymage. With Adam, He schulde bilden an oost of beleevers, elles cawde the lyvynge preve or The Electe, who schulde knowleche Goddes powere bifore ony false praiere were praierd to hem. As mannus drawed anent to science and technologie, thises aduancementes deriven streyt bak to scrypptures fonde withinne scrypptures. God hopide mannus schulde loonte bak into her awne religieous techynge that helden greet ynsicht into iftereuelacions thurth out al histrie therby understondynge Hevenes truthe more intrynsecally thanne euer bifore! This alowed mannus dominioun on Erthe while kepynge summe regulacions to forber furder stryf bitwixt gode forces and evyle ones."

Hearing this, another gym-goer stepped forth. Clearly a Lutheran man, given his German-style garb. He cast off his trench coat, beat his chest and said the following:

"Noe! Bifor man kynt was craeted, a powrful force knawne

as The Chronickles ronned through a feerse univers of ſtarrs and planetes. God, a deeite whiche transcended tyme and space, brouthe forth licht fro darke by creeatynge mankind in his awne image. He sawe poteenshol for greetnes ifs his creeation chosse to truſt him, so he ofered them the gifte of free-will. Thys began an iournye of impartynge knouledge, wisom and guidunsse untyll Adam, the firſte humaine beynge creeated in His image. With Adam, he wolde bilde an armie of beleeuers, othirwyses callde 'the lyvynge proufe' or 'The Elect,' who wolde recyponise God's powre bifor eny false preyer was preyed unto them. As man advanced toward scyence and technologie, thys advauncementes directli relatted back to scruptures fownde withyn scruptures. God hopide mankind wolde looke backe onto their awn religius teechings whiche held greut insyte unto pryevus revelations thurghoute hiſtorie therbye vndirſtonde Hevens trewe more intrinseli then evir bifore! Thys alowde humaine beynge doemynyon on Erthe while maynteynynge sum regulations to prevaynt furthe ſtrif betweyne good forcis and evel ones."

Then, suddenly, an Episcopalian wearing nothing but a toga and large Sennheiser headphones ſtepped forth, carrying a boombox. He played a beat, and then began to rhyme:

Befor man was made, a myghty power,
The Chroniqles it was y-clepyd;
God, aboven alle tyme and stoure,
Lette lyth to darke be lepyd.
Man he made in his owne schape;
Wi wille free, as we do rede.
He gaf hym knowledge and escape
To mankynde, of that he hade.
Adam, the ferste man y-born,
Was schryven yn Goddes lawe;
That The Elekte sholde be y-sworn
To Goddes worde and his sawe.
As mankynde grew in sciences newe
Goddes blessynges were not forgot;

By scriptures men shulde the truthe eschewe
And kynde dominion they had got.
Thanke be to God in alle his glorie
That man hath thus bene lered:
May Hithelige evermore be honour'd
In herte, mynne and worde."

"I'm not hearing none of this!" Trappanggino yelled, "and Mason... your faith in God is commendable, but there's something else you need to focus on: *Yourself*. No one else can save you from the pain inside, only YOU!" He paused for a moment and added softly: "You got dis..."

Then, he turned back around and began humming an old Sinatra tune as he sauntered out of the gym.

Jack and Charlie glanced at each other.

"Say, Charlie," Jack whispered "what's your interpretation of the bible?"

"Well Jack, its all about shapes. God is the square. Adam was the circle. Jesus Christ was the triangle. And the devil was the pentagon!"

"Well," Jack said, "I'm glad that you cleared up that little mystery for us."

Charlie looked puzzled:

"What are you talking about? What kind of mysteries?"

"Oh, just those things that I've been hearing people talk about. Like, if a barbell has four sides, and three points go straight down from the center of one side, where does the fourth point come out on top of the other side? Or how many times can you divide something into halves before there isn't any left anymore?"

"Huh?"

"Just some questions like that, you know... stuff."

"Okay..."

"Look, Charlie, I've been getting this funny feeling about all this stuff going on in the gym these days. You know what I mean? I mean... this is all just a little too weird for me. I mean what's all this stuff about shapes? And what's all this stuff about

God? I mean who's God anyway? What does he look like? And who's this Devil guy? Are they really going to get crucified on Wednesday? And what's all this stuff about the Hebrews? And who are these Hebrews? What's with all these Hebrews?" Charlie seemed to take a long time in answering Jack's questions.

"Well, Jack," he said at last, "it seems like you need to do some Jefferson deadlifts."

"Huh?"

"You know... some Jefferson deadlifts."

"Oh yeah... you mean like this?"

And Charlie did a number of full range Jefferson deadlifts in the middle of the gym floor.

Jack finally got it, "oh," he said, grinning and shaking his head in amazement, "this is just too weird! Why do you think I've been feeling funny all this time?"

Charlie grinned back at him:

"Maybe because you're supposed to be deadlifting."

"Oh... right..."

The two shared a laugh, and then they got back to work.

Jack & Charlie Explore a Cave. Cap. IV.

They had gotten quite deep into the system of caverns, when Jack thought it was a good time to leave.

"I don't know Jack," said Charlie, "I wouldn't mind living in cave, sort of reminds me of a tent."

"I don't believe it Charlie, it's much more like a cigar box, given that we can't see a way out."

"Oh, why is that anyway," Charlie asked.

"Suppose we're lost then,"

"It seems like it would be more fun to be lost in a funhouse."

Jack scowled:

"We're not lost, we're in a cave, we know where we are!"

"Ouch, don't trip on your sarcasm. Why don't we try the other tunnel in this system?" Charlie suggested.

Jack agreed and they went to the other tunnel. Again, they got a bit turned around. Charlie went back to explore the other path, and Jack went to a big rock.

"Hello brother," Jack said, in a sweet, thoughtful voice.

He was staring at a rock. It was jagged, uneven and marred by smooth depressions. It didn't look familiar. He reached up and touched it. It was cold. He pushed on it and the rock seemed to come alive.

Jack jumped back and knocked over the rock and looked to see what was inside. He peered into the hole and saw himself, slightly older. He was scared, and crawled out the hole. He ran.

Charlie came back to the spot and called Jack's name, but there was no answer. He noticed that the rock had been removed. He shivered, he could feel something wrong in this place. A chill wind blew throughout the cave and a deep moaning echoed, as if calling out his own name.

He ran down the way he came and saw a light at the entrance of the cave. He ran to it, then looked back one last time in wonderment.

Charlie gasped in amazement as he noticed Jack walking towards him from another tunnel with a big grin on his face.

"Where have you been?" Asked Charlie.

"In a cave," Jack said, cheerfully, "I know I told you, but it isn't so bad, I saw myself, you see."

Charlie wasn't going to let him get away with it:

"That isn't possible," he said, flatly.

"No, really, it is!"

"I'm not convinced."

"Well, it is! Come on."

Charlie followed him to the entrance of the cave.

It began to snow.

"Don't you feel strange, Charlie?"

"What do you mean?" Charlie said, confused.

"You know, like maybe you shouldn't be here."

Charlie shook his head:

"I don't know, but I've never felt like I didn't belong before."

"Well, neither have I!" Jack said, happily.

They both laughed merrily and walked off together. There was a light at the mouth of the cave, and a figure in white appeared from it:

"Why, hello. What brings you here?" It said.

"We were just exploring," said Charlie, smiling his innocent little boy's smile, "and we were just wondering why it is that *you* are here."

The figure in white seemed to hesitate for a second before answering: "Well," it said, "it's obvious that you are new here, and yet you know where you are going."

Jack looked at Charlie with astonishment, and then back at the figure in white, as if it knew something he didn't know.

"Well," said Charlie, "we seem to have gotten lost in one of the tunnels and I was just wondering why you were here."

The figure in white smiled at him and then turned its attention back to Jack, as if he were an equal partner in this conversation, instead of an annoying child who just had to have all the answers right at once: "This is my home," it said, "and I have been here for as long as I can remember."

The figure smiled at them again, as if pleased with their progress so far, and then began to walk away from them towards another tunnel entrance that wasn't very far away at all.

"Come on! There is much more for you to see!" It said, cheerfully, as they followed behind it into another tunnel where they were greeted by two more figures like the one they had met earlier, but larger and wearing tight-fitting white outfits that covered up their bodies quite well, except for their faces and hands, which were covered with white gloves that looked like they were made from white latex rubber which made them look strange when they moved, because they seemed as if they had to be greased up in order for them to move smoothly against each other, but when they did move smoothly against each other; they had the effect of making them look like very small pieces of rubberized tissue paper that were being gently pushed together by a slightly larger piece of paper that was pressing up against it

from behind, so that when they moved their arms they just seemed to be floating.

Charlie was beginning to understand how these people might have gotten lost in the first place.

"Is there anything else you need to ask about?" One of the figures in white said.

"Yes, actually," Charlie answered, "do you live underground? Is this some kind of underground city or something?"

Both of the figures nodded vigorously:

"Yes!" They said almost in unison.

"But, how?" Charlie asked.

Again, both of the figures nodded vigorously.

"How indeed?" Charlie added, shaking his own head.

One of the figures put its arm around Charlie's shoulder and pulled him close to it, as if trying to comfort him in a fatherly way:

"Don't worry son, everything will be fine," it whispered in Charlie's ear while patting him reassuringly on the back.

Then, the figure leaned forward and kissed Charlie on the forehead, and gave him a gentle push toward the other tunnel. Jack ran after him and caught up quickly. As they entered the next tunnel, the figure in white disappeared.

Charlie turned around to see if he could find it, but he couldn't see it anywhere. Charlie tried to follow the direction in which it had gone, but he kept getting turned around.

When Charlie finally found his way out of the cave, he sat down on the ground and cried. He had been crying for hours when Jack showed up. He was tired and hungry and very frightened. His tears stopped abruptly as soon as Jack appeared.

"Are you okay now?" Jack asked.

Charlie wiped his nose and sniffed loudly:

"Jack, have you ever plucked a chicken?"

"Sure, lots of times," Jack answered, looking puzzled.

"Have you seen the inside of one?"

"Of course. Why are you asking such odd questions today?"

Charlie shrugged and pointed down at his feet.

Jack looked at him curiously.

"What do you want me to look at?" He asked.

"Look between my toes," Charlie ordered.

Jack bent down and took hold of Charlie's foot. When he lifted it high enough for him to see, he saw a large, shiny object lying on top of the toe.

Jack picked it up:

"I don't recognize this," he siad.

"Neither does anyone else," said Charlie, "that's why everyone calls it a 'chicken egg.' "

Jack stared at the egg as if it were the most amazing thing he'd ever laid eyes on.

"Now, tell me what happened."

Jack explained the whole story from the time they got lost until they got out of the cave. Then, he finished with the fact that he hadn't even known that eggs came from chickens.

"So, that explains why you think that the figures in white are the same ones who brought us here," Charlie concluded.

"Yeah, but why would they bring us here in the first place?"

"Maybe they wanted to show you where you belonged," Charlie suggested.

"Or maybe they just wanted to make sure we stayed," Jack said, grimacing at the thought. "Hey, wait a minute!"

"Huh?"

"If we are supposed to stay, why haven't they shown themselves again since then?" Jack demanded angrily.

Charlie frowned deeply: "You know, I once read a book about a shoe shiner named Shoe Shine Joe. In it, he used to say: 'If wishes were horses, beggars would ride.' "

"Shoeshine Joe? You mean *Shoeless Joe Jackson*?" Jack asked excitedly.

"No, Shoe Shine Joe, as in, *Shoe Shine Joe.* Anyway, in this particular chapter in the book he says: 'if wishes were shoeshines, beggar kids would have every pair in town.' "

"Well, if wishes were shoeshines, beggar children would have a lot of money," Charlie added.

Jack smiled broadly and patted Charlie on the back.

"You know, you may have something there," he said.

Suddenly, a broad shadow fell across them. They turned around and saw the figure in white standing above them:

"Life was but a dream, life is but a dream; only death is real."

Jack and Charlie continued down the cave. Fungus and mushrooms grew everywhere. It was very dark, but the little lights on the ground were pretty.

"Did you have any idea that caves could be this beautiful?" Charlie asked.

"Yeah, but I've never seen such wonderful mushrooms!"

"What's a Mushroom?"

"Not a mushroom,—a fungus," Jack answered.

"What is a fungus?" Charlie repeated.

Jack stopped, hesitated for a moment, and then said: "You'll see!" Then he took a few steps, stopped, and said, "you'll see!"

Charlie stared at Jack for a moment, but he couldn't believe what he was hearing. He had to hear it again to be sure he heard right.

"WILL YOU SEE!?" Jack yelled, "YOU'LL SEE!"

"HUH!?"

Suddenly, the darkness was pierced by the brightness of a thousand lanterns. Jack and Charlie stood facing hundreds of statues, each one adorned with just the sort of golden bells that Jack had seen in a movie about a pirate.

Suddenly, Jack saw a large red egg sitting in a large open cavern, "A HUGE CAVE!" Jack said excitedly, "A REAL CAVE!"

He ran to the egg and picked it up. It was as hard as a rock, and it was really heavy. He had to drag it through the cave because it was too big to carry.

The egg broke,—it shattered, and the sounds was deafening. The egg pieces flew all over the cave. Finally, Jack had to crawl on his hands and knees to get through the wreckage. After he had cleared the pieces, he saw a beautiful piece of glass shard with a bright red gem embedded in it:

"A WIND MACHINE!" Jack exclaimed.

It was only then that Charlie figured out what Jack had meant. In one of the fragments of the egg he had found a transparent glass capsule. No,—it was an egg.

"WOW!" Jack exclaimed, "did you see that glow?"

"Where?" Charlie asked.

Jack pointed to the rock wall, where a small pool of water was just beginning to glow.

"That's a Swimming Pool!" Jack shouted.

The most beautiful thing they had seen yet, were the torches that lit the way, as they worked their way through the cave.

The torches cast an eerie luminescence throughout the unfamiliar cave, giving the surrounding environment a surreal yet captivating beauty; almost as if it was plucked from a dream. But still, the uncertainty of where exactly they were and how to get out unnerved them.

After what felt like hours of aimless wandering, they finally laid eyes on a door no more than ten feet ahead. Trepidation set in, but soon enough they found themselves walking towards it with a newfound energy.

As their steps got closer, a sound akin to thunder pierced the air; like an explosion, like broken glass. Sounds that reminded them of their own loneliness and sadness,—of being kicked in the stomach and holding one's breath in response. But such sentiments were halted when they were met with the entirely factual realization that such feelings were unfamiliar to them; feelings that they did not recognize or even understand, without an explanation,—and so they were left unspoken, as their feet continued walking forward unmindful of their inner turmoil; only occasionally pausing long enough to look into each others eyes, as if making sure that this was not all just another dream or hallucination; only pausing long enough for them both to say together—just once before continuing forward:—"We are here! We are real! We are alive!"

Finally, reaching their destination; however brief or misplaced, such an ecstasy may have been, all doubts vanished as soon as they saw what lay at their feet, which was not only real,

but also far beyond anything either of them could have ever imagined. And all doubts vanished when Jack realized that this wasn't another hallucination or dream; not this time anyway. This time it was *real*, and it was far too real for either one of them to handle alone,—yet somehow, together they managed just fine, and together they walked toward their destiny, and together, they passed through their destiny, and together, they began their new life together, and together, as one, they began their new journey together, and together, as one...

Jack sighed: "Oi, mate," he said, turning to Charlie, "you ever fuck a fish?"

Charlie shook his head very slowly, as if trying to keep himself from fainting.

"Well, now's your chance."

"Huh?"

"I mean, you don't know what you're missing."

"What are you talking about, Jack?"

"I'm talking about fish-fucking, in a metaphorical sense. I mean, you see, if wishes were fishes... you know... beggar kids would be swimming in cash."

"Come again?"

"Oh come on, mate! Are you serious?"

Charlie stared at Jack, his expression becoming increasingly confused and concerned. Then, realization dawned on his face like a rainbow breaking through clouds: "Well," he said, slyly, "perhaps you should ask someone who knows what they're doing." And with that he reached forward into the darkness and grabbed hold of a large leather strap attached to the front of a large wooden box. He pulled the box forward and opened it, revealing the figure in white. It began to sing a ditty:

Life is merely a dream, if death is what's real;
Times of the sun & years of the earth are not equal.
The man was alive, still with hands and feet,
His eyes were open, yet no movement could he meet.
No cry or word could he utter, and could not move.
But he'd seen all life's offers, & finally he slept.

Jack and Charlie shook their heads, they couldn't believe what they were hearing. They looked at each other with big grins on both sides.

"Oi, Charlie,—is that Shoe Shine Joe?"

Charlie nodded enthusiastically:

"Oh yes, mate. Shoe Shine Joe."

"And what does that have to do with fish-fucking?"

Charlie smiled, then turned to face his friend: "I don't know, but let's get out of here before we hear anything else."

They scrambled from the dank cave, running into a strange and eerie darkness. An eternity seemed to pass as their feet thudded across the terrain. The harsh and unforgiving landscape clawed at their clothes, staining them with black dirt and green moss. Blood trickled from their sunburnt skins, where sharp rocks had marked them. Then, suddenly, a large white horse stood before them in the shimmering sunlight, its majestic gaze fixed on the pair, as if it had been expecting them.

Charlie and Jack ran, as they had done so many times before, but this time there were no more songs to sing, no more stories to tell; not a thing that was familiar. And just as quickly as they had gotten on the horse, they were back in the clearing again.

"This is the end," said Jack, "we have to leave now."

Charlie stood motionless and stared out at the grass, as if seeing something far beyond.

Jack peered into the distance:

"What is it?" He asked.

Charlie cackled as he turned around:

"I've been ruminating, Jack, on that old saying: 'The man who dies with the most toys wins,' and I realized what it truly entails. It suggests: 'The man who dies with the greatest playthings succeeds!' "

"The greatest toys?" Jack queried, eyebrows furrowed.

Charlie nodded eagerly: "The top-notch toys, for not everyone passes away with the same amusements! But we won't perish now, shall we? We'll survive!" Charlie leapt about in a frenzied state of glee:

"And we shall call ourselves Jack and Charlie LIVE!"

Jack laughed, slapping Charlie's back, robustly, as he declared: "Yes, live! That's our mission."

Jack & Charlie Encounter Ludwig Wittgenstein. Cap. V.

DUring their service, having somehow been pressed into the Scythian Confederate Army, despite their questionable ages,—Jack and Charlie encountered Ludwig Wittgenstein in the trenches of Northern Europe. He was the his country's foremost phenomenologist.

With a cultured instinct, which at this point was a major novelty in the history of philosophy, they got into a good conversation with him, and at the same time were shocked by the fact that Wittgenstein was apparently indifferent to whether or not he was known as a great logician, or if they had studied him as a philosopher.

"I have no doubt, whatsoever, that after a good deal of thought, you will have solved all your problems," he said to the two Englishmen. But the further they got from the question of paradoxes of self-referential signs, of sentence-ends, the more it seemed he did not even know what these problems were.

Charlie asked him whether "if," "if not," "not," and "more than," were reducible to the single word "if," or whether we had to abandon them.

Wittgenstein went on to say that even if it turned out that there were such things as problems of "if" and "if not," they would still have to be solved. This startled the two Englishmen, and they ran away, shaken. It had seemed to them that Wittgenstein, like the rest of the young of that war, knew everything. They came to the conclusion that this also was a sign of an educated person. "It is only we who do not know," they concluded.

Wittgenstein studied them for a moment, and said nothing; but he understood that they were very English, and he wished them luck. He turned to his book.

The two returned and stood in front of him for a moment.

"Have you studied logic?" He asked them, in a quite different way.

"Yes," said Jack, quite matter-of-factly, and took Wittgenstein's book from his hands. It was in fact a book written by the man himself.

"What are you going to do with it?" Asked Wittgenstein.

"Read it," Jack anwsered.

"What? Read it? I do not understand at all what you want to read it for. There are only dilemmas of convention; I have simply shown that they are dilemmas."

"I wanted to know what arguments you use."

"All you need to know is that I do not use arguments."

"Then what do you use?"

"Just sit down with a pencil and paper, and argue with yourself. That is all," he said, with a mild tone of irritation.

"What?" Asked Jack, who was somewhat puzzled by the man's unintelligible manner.

"For example," said Wittgenstein, "which sign do you put before the things in the world, and which before the things in a symbol-ring. Now, 'he,' 'his' or 'he-that,' 'he-the' or 'that-that'? The first would mean 'he is here.' The second would mean 'he is not here.' But the more frequently we use this sign, the more often it occurs with the words that have already been used as the name of a person. The right word is 'he-it' because there is no place for a question mark. It means 'he is it,' for example: 'He-the Chief.' So, what I am really saying is that there is no point in having a question mark on the word, because it would spoil the sign for one sign and it would not be clear which sign it was for. If we had-"

"But," Charlie interrupted, "if you ask which sign we should use, then you *know* which one we should use."

"Ah, but then the question is: How many signs to use, in which situation, and in which case to use which one. And I do not know."

"But you know what you mean. You know that he's here."

"But I don't know how many signs are necessary. The 'thing' sign has to be used in case there is a question about whether the 'thing' is here or not. Otherwise it would be nonsense, like this sign which is used to talk about 'the thing he is about to speak' if 'thing' is the sign."

"What?" Said Charlie.

"What sign should we use," Jack jumped in, "for 'he-that-that'?"

"He-that. He is that. He is the one with that."

"And what does 'He-that-that' mean?" Jack inquired.

"He is that, or he is that, or he is that."

"Which of these is he, and which isn't he? Is he a girl?"

"Of course not."

"Then what is he?"

"He is that, or he is that, or he is that."

"Which one?" Jack said, leaning his head forwards.

"He."

"What sign should we use for 'he-that'?" Charlie asked.

"He."

There was a moment of silence between the three.

Jack and Charlie whispered amongst themselves, and then, finally, Jack asked:

"So which one is he, which one isn't he?"

"He," Wittgenstein answered.

"And which one is a little person?" Charlie asked.

"He."

"And which one is a girl?"

"He."

"He's not!" Charlie yelped, remembering his school days, and the famous "Trick of Socrates" he had once read about, while Jack put his hands on his head in disbelief and briefly paced away from the two, before turning around and returning to the discourse.

"Who is he?" Jack inquired.

"He." Wittgenstein replied.

"How?" Charlie asked.

"He's standing in the middle of the room."

"But which one is he, and which one isn't he? Is he really standing in the middle of the room, or is he not standing in the middle of the room? And is he the little person or is he not the little person?" Charlie inquired, as they then engaged in a rapid verbal exchange:

"He is the little man standing in the middle of the room."

"But how?" Charlie asked.

"He's wearing this hat."

"Which hat?"

"The one with the picture of a hat on it."

"What picture?"

"The one with the hat."

"And which hat?"

"The one with the hat."

"What picture?"

"The one with the hat."

"I don't see one."

"And which one is the hat?"

"The one with the hat."

"We are going in circles here!" Jack cut in, "explain to me what the sign is that you mean, and where you want it to be used. And don't tell me,—tell it *to* me."

Wittgenstein immediately replied: "There is no use to have a question mark. It will spoil a sign. The 'or' that comes between 'he' and 'it' might come before or after. I mean there is no harm in 'ne' or 'em' just as there is no harm in 'to' or 'me'. Let us just put these silly questions out of our minds and let us get on with our work. These questions have no place in logical reasoning."

"But what if we used 'ne' or 'em' instead of 'he' or 'it'?"

Wittgenstein shook his head:

"Then we are back to using a single sign for each thing, as we did before. And that is nonsense, and we shall have to find a new way of proceeding with all of this."

This response was—from Jack's point of view—not that satisfactory. At that moment, he was realizing that Wittgenstein was not quite the kind of rational philosopher he had heard

about. There was something very erratic and highly peculiar about his behavior. But, this disquiet was temporarily forgotten, as he saw his best friend struggling with a set of verbal paradoxes.

Charlie stood up and spoke: "Listen to me, this is all pointless. We've been arguing here for hours over signs that aren't signs, just because we wanted to prove that there is only one way of speaking, and that we are just talking nonsense. Why don't you just tell me why you prefer 'he' and what the word 'or' is? I'll tell you what 'or' means in physics: It stands in for an unknown quantity. For example, if I ask for the location of a one horse open sleigh, it is not enough to say 'it is west of me'; I have to also say that it is 'north of me,' and all the other possible directions, until its actual location can be determined. Or 'or' can stand in for the speed of light. If I ask you what the speed of light is, you can tell me with certainty it is 299,792.458 miles per second. But that doesn't prove what the speed of light is. What it proves is, that it can be measured. Or, if I say to you that my father can run twenty miles in ten minutes, you will reply that you don't know what that means. Or if I ask you if you know my name, you will say, yes, you do, you know it very well. But there is no doubt about that either; it is just a matter of practice. Or I can ask you if you know your real name; there is also no doubt about that either; it is just a matter of practice. And if I then say, I want to have your name, you won't answer me. You will say, my real name is something else. My real name is not my name; it is something else. But you will not tell me, because that is your secret; that is your secret, and you will not tell me!

"You don't say it is a problem," said Wittgenstein, slowly rubbing his chin, "why should there be a problem? Does it depend on my position? If I sit down, I can use the terms 'he' and 'she', and get my meaning exactly right. If I stand up, I might have to change the order. The word 'or' seems to stand in for the unknown quantity. So, I take it as a rule to use 'or' instead of 'he'. And that way, why should I need an extra sign for something I already know about? It seems to be the best way of talking."

"Now, don't get confused," said Charlie, "it might look like a problem to you. You have to stop thinking that there is only one way of speaking. What I just said is not a formal argument, but a description of what I have always done in this case."

"What am I supposed to do, start using 'she' and 'he' without the sign 'or'? Why is that better?"

"The answer is: I don't know. You have to ask me."

"I don't know how to ask."

"Well, then I think it's the best way of talking. It means I have to see that the unknown quantity doesn't matter. I have to find out if I need another sign to tell me it is not important. I am just giving you this picture. If you already knew that a word like 'is' is always the same sign, then this very same word would be quite different."

"I don't know," Wittgenstein stated.

"Well, you know what I think is going to happen?" Charlie said, pointing at him, "I think you are going to get out your pocket-sized atlas and find yourself right next to the entry for Eskimo."

"All right, all right," Jack threw up his hands, "but I don't see how it changes anything. If you said that Eskimos are everywhere and everywhere is Eskimo, it wouldn't mean anything."

"It would," said Charlie, "that is the way you see it from your position. But if you ask me, I would say that the words themselves don't have meaning. You want to talk to me about words that you already know. I don't want to talk about words you already know. For me, the words have meaning only when I find them. Until then, they are just names for things. I am not interested in names that already exist. I want new words. What about names? Some say names can never change, but there is a new world of words, and I want to use them. I can see that if I use a word that already exists, it is going to get stuck in your mind, but if I use a new word, if I start to write it on a piece of paper or speak it, that is how I am going to change the world."

"All right," said Jack, "I have to admit that you're right. But what have you got against words?"

"I don't have anything against words," said Charlie, "but I do have something against you. You really think words have meaning? Look around. What can words tell us? I'm not saying you haven't come up with any great inventions and that inventions are great. But I think they always have an element of luck. You see, inventions are one way of changing the world. That is why we do science and literature and history. We don't invent them to change the world. We invent them to change us. What I object to is the idea that you can change the world with words that already exist."

"Well, now I see what you mean. I never thought of that."

"You don't see that the whole subject is really only about words," said Charlie, "look at the other things. The pens we use, the money we use. Are they important? What's the difference? We write words down, and we count them, and they're there. There are millions and millions of other things. How about the telescope? Where does that fit in?"

Wittgenstein laughed:

"You are talking about a completely different subject. What about a million people? If I was to ask them, would they care whether the phrase 'round paper' was in the Oxford English Dictionary or not?"

"It's like a space mission," said Jack, "what about that? They use words to go to space. Now you see where I'm coming from."

"So I do," said Wittgenstein.

"Well, let me give you a better idea. What about a telescope? What would I care if the phrase 'round paper' wasn't in the dictionary?"

"It wouldn't change the world," Wittgenstein replied.

"Yes, it would. All the people who would never even know about it, would care. The people who would care about it would care because the telescope has to work, and 'not work' is not a matter of indifference. You wouldn't care in such a case. You would just say it has nothing to do with you, or something like that. Well, that's what I say. If it had nothing to do with you then you wouldn't care about it."

"That is also what I would say," Jack replied.

"But then, if you were really an expert, if you really knew everything there was to know about the telescope, then you would see things, you would know things, you would change things with your understanding of the world. And when you did, things would possibly change for the better; depending on your moral character."

"If that were true," said Jack, "then why should I bother to learn? If I already know that it works, why should I bother to learn more about it?"

"Exactly. You're telling me that you already know. And the same thing is true of me, that I already know everything there is to know about the telescope, and therefore the moment I have a new idea I can put it into practice. What difference does it make to me? Just as when I knew that it was done, and I couldn't get it to work; I would put it out of my mind."

"All right, all right... What about you? Are you all about just putting things out of your mind? That's what it sounds like."

"I am. But that's the point. What I'm saying is, your basic attitude is to just go out, shoot at things, and hope that something sticks. But it doesn't. Things don't work that way. You see, the difference between you and me is that I am trying to make an example of you, and that I am trying to get you to understand what it means to have a point of view."

Jack laughed:

"And I'm trying to give you some tips. I'm telling you what I think, and what I think is that it's not enough to just put things out of your mind. You have to work. I'm telling you that you must go out, shoot at things, and see what sticks."

"The next thing you should learn about," Charlie added, "is that you must have an understanding of yourself. In order to do that, you must know the first thing about yourself. Then, if you know the first thing about yourself, then you must try and be able to tell yourself the same thing. That's why we're all in such a state, thinking that this one thing is going to help us on

with one thing that's the most important to do. Now, it may seem to you that it isn't very important."

"It's not very important, but to me it is," Wittgenstein said.

"You mean it's important to you," said Charlie, "but not to everybody else? I mean, that is how you are now, and it's hard to be that way."

"That's true. I guess you're right."

"And just so I'm clear," Charlie continued, "if the reason that you think you have to be what you are is that you think that that is the way to really understand the world, if you're really convinced that if you knew the entire world was like the way you were, then you could finally understand the world, then you'll realize that there's no reason to ever get any further with the one thing that is most important to do; the most important thing that you can ever do. After you've realized that, then you can stop working on things, stop trying to figure out how to be different. Because, in the first place, there is no reason to change. And in the second place, even if you are sure that you can do all things, and you know that if you want to, you can do anything. But you're not going to, because to change one thing is to change everything. You can't really change your home, your government, your way of thinking, not in the way people usually think about this. But if you want to be a little more clever, you can change what you do with your time, and the fact that you're being clever with your time doesn't alter anything. It's just being clever with your time. That's all it is."

"So," Jack started, "if you aren't going to ever change, I see no reason for me to do anything."

"No reason at all, Jack, because no matter what you do, you're not going to be any smarter. You can only be what you are. You can't be more than that."

"Well, what's the use of that?" Asked Wittgenstein.

Before they could answer, he continued:

"What's the use of being smarter? You see, there's the fundamental question of the whole problem. It seems to me that the real reason that we have these things, is not so that we can

change. It's to express our differences. To express the fact that we're individuals. And as soon as that's clear to you, you'll know the answer to your question. It's the one thing that makes the difference. It is the most important thing. It is the most important thing that you can ever do, and the question, to be perfectly honest, is why in the world anybody would try to do anything else?"

"You're a philosopher," Jack said bluntly.

"I am a philosopher. But that's the thing that I'm explaining to you. You see, you have to have a point of view. If you have a point of view, then you can define yourself and your place in the world. So that in the first place there is no reason why you should not be a philosopher. But, in the second place, you'll see that the problem is that you are confused, that you are trying to change something, that you are trying to become something else. Because, if you don't want to be what you are, then the only reason for you to not change is that you are being stubborn, that you are stubborn about your point of view. And you're absolutely certain that you can't become any other person. You're absolutely certain that you're the only person in the world. Well, I've got news for you, man..."

"Okay," said Jack.

"You are not the only person in the world," Wittgenstein continued, "there are other people out there. And that's the one thing that makes the difference. So you've got to come to terms with it." Wittgenstein was becoming viably angry, in a strange and calm way.

"The old man said, that the only reason to do anything is to be the best at it. So, what the hell good would it do to become a philosopher, if I'm already the best philosopher in the world?"

"Well, it depends," Wittgenstein answered.

"On what?"

"On whether you know what you're doing or not."

"Oh... so, this philosophy stuff is not exactly about a point of view. Or it doesn't say anything about a point of view. I'm tired of it..."

"Which is the point, Jack," Wittgenstein stated.
"I can't seem to do anything..."
"Because you're trying to be a little bit smarter."
"I am not trying to be a little bit smarter."
"Okay. But you are."
"No I'm not."
"Yes, you are."
"No I'm not."
"But you are, Jack."
"No I'm not."
"Yes, you are. Here, you are not trying to be anything, just to do what you think you should be doing. Isn't that it?"
"No I'm not."
"Are you sure?"
"I'm not sure."
"What's your definition of 'not sure'?"
"I don't know."
"What do you think it means to be not sure?"
"What's the point?"
"Here's my point. So you are not sure, right? But if you are not sure, then you can't do anything else but what you've already done. Which is nothing. But the point is: You can do more than nothing. You can do something. So when you are not sure that you have got the choice to do something, or not do anything; it's your choice. So, on one hand it's easy to know what you should be doing, but on the other hand it's a very hard thing to know what you should be doing."
"This philosophy is bullshit," Jack said, throwing his hands in the air.
"That's the point, Jack. This philosophy is all 'bullshit,' as you say, it is all tricks and pretending, and you have to be good at pretending to be something that you are not, to be better at doing something that you've already done. It doesn't mean anything. It's like, you say 'no,' but I don't know what the hell you mean. So, I am not going to do what you tell me to do. Do you understand?"

"Right," Jack answered,"I think you're full of it. You know, Ludwig, this is the only place you're ever going to find another philosopher of worth, and the point of finding another philosopher, is not to be better at doing what they do than you are, it's to become as great as they are. Is that what you want, Ludwig?"

"Yes, I want to be as great as anybody is."

"Do you?"

"Yes."

"Well then, here's what you can do: You can make yourself as great as they are."

"Okay."

"And if you do that, then all you have to do is not care about the things that they care about, you know, the things that they think are important. And that, herr Wittgenstein, is a little harder than pretending to be smart. But it's worth doing. It's worth being as great as you can be. And you'll be at the top of the class, and that's all that matters."

"How do you get to be as great as they are?" Wittgenstein inquired.

"You keep thinking. As far as I know, it's always the thinking that does it. But you have to think all the time. You have to be completely focused on trying to think. You have to stop whatever you're doing and say: 'Right, I'm thinking now.' It's not the thinking that matters. It's the thinking that gets you there. Not the thinking when you're in the zone. Not the thinking that lets you sleep at night. That's what you should be doing, that's all you have to do. And that's the most important question I can ask you. That's what it's all about. It's not the thinking when you're around your friends. It's the thinking when you're by yourself: 'What do you think of me? What do you think of me? What do you think of me? I'm thinking now.' All you have to do is think like that, and you're as good as anybody. If you want to be as good as Socrates or Jesus, or whoever you want to be, you have to do the same thing. Don't forget the thinking. Don't let anyone talk you out of it."

"I don't want to lose my friends," Wittgenstein answered.

"Of course you don't want to lose your friends. You want to be better than your friends. The point is, you have to do the thinking when you're by yourself, and that's what you have to be doing. Now, be as great as you are, and when you get there you don't have to do anything else. You don't have to be Socrates. You don't have to be Jesus. You don't have to be anybody. You just have to think really hard: 'Why are we here? What's all this about? What's going to happen to the world? What do I really believe?' And that's your business, and that's what makes you great."

"I don't know"

"You don't have to know. Just do it. Don't worry about what you think of me. It doesn't matter. It won't hurt you one bit. Don't worry about the future. All you have to think about is: 'What am I thinking now?' And that's all that matters."

"I will try to think like that," Wittgenstein said.

Charlie got up, turned away, and was about to leave the trench. He thought for a moment, then turned back:

"Does that sound like something somebody would think?" He said, "isn't that the whole point?"

Jack's face went blank: "Yes. I think so. I'm not sure. This sounds so pretentious. It sounds like something a very rich Englishman would say."

"I'm not rich. I'm just... I am... I'm me. I'm Jack, I'm Charlie, I'm Jack. They're Jack and Charlie. They are Jack and Charlie, not me..."

"Why do you think they can say that?"

"Because they've thought a lot about it. I don't think I've thought about it, actually. I just go on being Jack. That's all there is to it. And then I just go on being Charlie."

Jack laughed: "Charlie, I'm Jack. You're Charlie. That's Ludwig Wittgenstein. How is this not pretentious?"

Charlie turned away and shrugged: "Well, it's going to sound pretentious to you. But I don't care."

Wittgenstein sat in silence, his eyes wide-open and tense.

Suddenly, they heard a loud explosion. The enemy forces, composed of Micronesian militiamen, were throwing a hail of artillery shells into a nearby ridge of high peaks. They had captured a signal tower on top of the mountain, and Soon they would be sweeping down on the Southwestern coast by the town of Ukleevo and, perhaps, would manage to eliminate the airbase there.

Jack, dazed and distracted by the explosion, had forgotten that he existed for a moment. He turned towards Charlie and Wittgenstein.

"Jack," said Wittgenstein, remaining very calm, "how do we know that we're still human?"

Jack sighed and spoke quickly: "We've thought about it. There's no doubt. We can do arithmetic. We have a brain that's much bigger than theirs. We have all these other things that they don't have. Do you know what those things are? The only thing I can think of is consciousness. And, if we have consciousness, we can't be that far away from being something like them. So, the obvious answer is: Yes, we're human."

Charlie looked confused: "But how do we know that we have consciousness? Wouldn't we have to go around asking other people?"

"Yes, you've got it right. We have to go around asking other people if we're human. But, after a while, it'll be self-evident. I know that it was like that for me."

"But..."

Jack shrugged: "Come on, Charlie. We're not so different, you and I. Even if I was born in a Russian kuffar-gulag, I think I'd feel very much the same. Anyway, look, the enemy is approaching. We need to get ourselves into some kind of defensive formation. If they were to come around the corner, and find that we're not here, they'd probably think that we'd gone over to them. So, we're going to go over to them, and start shooting."

Charlie nodded: "It's the only way."

The three of them proceeded with their plan and began to fire on the enemy troops. The Micronesian fighters fell, and

then made a dash towards the ridge, on which they had just come. They were being pursued, but soon returned. Soon, the Russian fighters emerged from the smoke and gunfire, and covered the escape of the Micronesians troops, who had fallen back. Jack, Wittgenstein, and Charlie, fired on the attackers, and by the end of the day the Micronesian militiamen had been defeated and driven back. The enemy troops had retreated to their ships. And when the three approached Ukleevo, they found nothing but a burnt-out town, and nothing but barren grasslands.

Charlie wept, or at least appeared to:

"That's horrible," he said, "the worst part is that the Micronesian people are never going to be forgiven. No one will be able to forgive them for what they did."

"I agree," Jack said, who himself looked tired and drained from the intensity of the battle, "but it's only the beginning. When they come back, we can keep attacking them."

Jack and Charlie retired to their tent. There, they made love to a comfort woman from the Marianas Islands. By the next day, Charlie had found solace and closure.

As they approached the Russian cruiser, Charlie remarked: "This is exactly the kind of big adventure that I always dreamed of. Like in those old stories."

Jack nodded: "It sure is."

Wittgenstein approached them. He had overheard them talking, and said, in his usual philosophical manner: "I should say, don't worry. If that's how your mind works, then the way that you think will soon change," he then clapped his hands together, like a conductor, "now, let's have a rehearsal of the big fight."

The three of them put on their combat gear and headed towards the heavy fighting with the rest of their division. When they reached the lines, they began to fire on the enemy, and then Wittgenstein shouted:

"Now you may begin!" And the battle began. They shot at everything that moved, and soon, the Micronesian fighters were surrounded and in full retreat. They were just beginning to run away, when Wittgenstein shouted: "Now make a run for it!"

And, pointing to the landing ship, he yelled: "There! You can escape there!" Then he raised his hands and shouted: "Charge!" And they turned their attention to the ship, and began to fire on it as well. The three men returned to the downed Micronesian soldiers, who were trying to escape.

They began to fire at the retreating enemy. Jack and Charlie, who had been in the front, took refuge behind a mound of rocks. Wittgenstein ran to them and yelled: "Get out! Get out! There's no room!"

Jack and Charlie remained behind the rocks, Wittgenstein, however, advanced to the front. He ran toward the Micronesian militiamen, who were still in the middle of the battlefield.

"Get up!" He shouted, and, still firing, he reached the middle of the battle, where the dead and dying Micronesian fighters were lying. He raised his arms and shouted: "Charge!"

He was now facing the landing ship. Seeing this, Jack fired as he charged. Charlie fired as well.

Jack and Wittgenstein charged at the front of the landing ship, but the enemy had started to run away. There was a loud explosion. The ship was on fire, and the Russian sailors had discovered that they had been ambushed by the *Hump Force*. The battle was now hopeless.

The Hump Force was an elite international force composed of soldiers from different nations, including the British, Irish, French, Germans, Japanese, Greeks, Indians, Canadians, and the Maori. They were highly skilled and extremely well-trained soldiers. Jack, Charlie, and Wittgenstein, joined them on the troop transport ship, and the three of them played a large part in the Hump Force's attack on the Russian cruiser, sinking it.

When all was said and done, the three men looked upon the destruction. Wittgenstein looked at the mounds of dead Micronesians and said:

"You people have no future. No future at all, there is no future for those of you who are killed. You will never return from your graves to be with your families and loved ones."

The three men looked out over the barren landscape of the Varanger Peninsula. Wittgenstein looked at Jack. He thought for a minute, and then said:

"For a long time, I'd never been far from home. Once I left my home, I was lost, I had no direction, and I was just wandering the desert, like a man lost in a wild land. Then a man came and offered to sell me a bay. It was a bay that was part of an island. He said that it was a vast island, like the Amazon, and that the only people who lived there were the Indians. He said that they did not know the meaning of electricity, or a car, or the telephone, and that they had no other use for the bay. He told me to come alone and bring the money. So I went to the bay and found a tiny colony of men, all of whom were dying, even though they did not know it. They were unable to live, but they lived in ignorance. I left them and went out into the jungle, and I lived there for a year. When I came back to the bay, they were all dead.

Charlie stared out at the ocean: "These people are all dead. They have no future. All they can do is wait to be brought back to life, and they don't even know that they are waiting to be brought back to life." Charlie appeared to cross himself quickly, but it wasn't clear to anyone.

"And you have no future," said Wittgenstein, "when you die, you will return to the earth, and you will stay there forever. And that is all that you can do."

"What about you?" Said Jack, "you have no family, and you have no home. Why do you still live out here?"

"When I was a younger man," said Wittgenstein, "I went to sea. We sailed from Russia to Japan, and from Japan to New Zealand. Then, after I was on leave, I took the return voyage to Japan. I lived in Japan, and married a Japanese woman. One day, I went out to sea again, and I saw a huge wave come up and wash out the island of Mangaia. The wave was as tall as a mountain, and it covered the whole island. Everyone was washed away. I saw the remains of houses on top of the rocks. I saw the island bare for two years. But the sea returned. When I had

lived there a long time, the sea came back again. I could not understand it. But when I saw the last of the waves, I understood that it was the waves of the sea that washed away all the lives that had been in the island. And it is the sea that will return to the island."

The sun was almost at the western horizon, and time was growing short. They needed to get going.

Jack & Charlie Watch a Football Game. Cap. VI.

For nearly an hour, Jack and Charlie were seated in a pub, watching a football game.

"I really like eating Welsh rarebit," Charlie said, while enjoying his meal.

"Do you really?" Jack asked.

"Yeah, it has, like, not enough sauce, but it's got cheese."

"No cheese," said Jack, "and the sauce's not on the bread."

"Are you sure?" Charlie asked.

"Yeah, no cheese on the bread."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

"Are you sure you're sure?"

"No, I'm not sure, I'm sure."

Charlie then went to get the cheese.

"Are you sure?" Jack said, pointing a finger at him.

"I'm sure, I'm sure," Charlie replied.

"How sure are you, Charlie?"

"I'm sure," he said, "I'm sure."

"You're not a hundred percent sure, are you?"

"No."

"Well, let me ask you this: What would you call being ninety-nine-point-nine percent sure?"

"That's pretty sure," Charlie answered.

They turned their attention the game. China was winning by two goals to nil. The announcer said: "China will be going for the four-nil win!"

Jack and Charlie looked at each other. They both knew that there was no such thing as a 4-0 scoreline in football. It didn't make sense., and yet...

"Oh my God!" Charlie shouted "I think we've been had!"

The commentator continued:

"And now it's 3-0! A beautiful goal from Li Wang after some great work by the Chinese striker."

England was losing, and they were starting to get angry.

They left their seats, walked up to the manager of the pub, and asked him:

"Excuse me sir, can you tell us what is happening here?"

"Well, it's just a football match," he said, "that's all."

"But how come they have a 4-0 scoreline?" Charlie asked.

"Well, that's because, you see, it's a fantasy match."

"A fantasy match?"

"Yes."

"But isn't this real life? Is this a dream or something?"

The manager smiled. He looked over to the TV screen, where a man was talking about the action of the match:

"This is actually quite an exciting game, isn't it?"

"It sure is," said Jack, "but it doesn't make any sense. You don't play 4-0 games in football."

"It makes perfect sense," said the man, who was speaking on the TV, "after all, if you do play a 4-0 game, the score stays the same afterwards, right?"

"Right," Jack answered.

"So why bother changing the score at all?"

"Why change it?"

"Because, well, you know, even though it might not seem like it, it's still fun to watch."

"You think so?"

"Absolutely."

"Well, that's true, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

"Well, it's all down to perspective. Everything is relative. If you want to look at it from another angle, then you could say

that when you're watching football, it's more interesting to see things happen quickly."

"Right," Jack said, nodding slowly, "that makes sense."

"But if you want to take it one step further," the man on the TV continued, "you could also say that it's not actually faster than a normal football match. It's just that the way people experience time is different."

"So, you're saying that time speeds up for some people, and slows down for others?"

"Exactly. Time is relative. Look, I'm going to go back to the commentary now."

"Jack, you alright, mate?" Charlie nudged him with his elbow.

Jack was catatonically glaring at the TV on the wall.

"Oh, right then," he said, acting as normal as he could.

They sat next to each other and tried to ignore the fact that, to them, everything they saw had been completely changed in meaning, and yet, it was still happening all around them. They were in a pub, and they could see the footballers moving about, kicking the ball to one another, jogging, throwing the ball, making passes. Some of them were running, but others were walking, and they noticed that the commentary man, when he said 'running,' wasn't actually saying, 'moving in a certain gait.' Instead, he was saying, 'sprinting,' which meant 'running.' And they could see the crowd cheering, and hear the commentators talking about what was happening in the game.

They could see the players.

China was losing 3-0.

And yet, they were winning 4-0.

(The score had actually gone to 4-2.)

The commentator on the TV spoke:

"And that concludes the first half, and it looks as though China has scored another goal, and it's the Englishmen, Jack and Charlie, who have conceded!"

Jack said nothing. He couldn't speak. He felt paralyzed.

"Oh, and now it's England who's scoring! England has made it 2-1 with a nice header from Charlie!"

Charlie turned away: "I can't believe it..." he said.

Jack said nothing.

The commentator continued: "Now it's 3-1 to the Chinese! A beautiful goal from Li Wang after some great work by the Chinese striker."

Charlie shook his head.

England was winning 4-3.

(It went on to 5-4.)

In the second half, the Chinese team scored twice. Then, suddenly, they scored three more times with a hat-trick from Li Wang. Suddenly England was losing 6-4.

The commentators were still talking.

Jack said nothing.

Charlie said nothing.

But Jack and Charlie were no longer the only two men in the pub, and neither were they alone. They had never realized how crowded it was until now. The place was packed with other silent spectators, who were in a state of shock. The room buzzed with their collective silence. But Jack and Charlie didn't talk, and they hardly dared move.

Then, suddenly, the match was over.

The score: 7-5 to the Chinese.

They were silent.

"Oh, I hope they don't cancel it out at the end," Charlie said, breaking the silence, "that would be awful."

"Yeah," Jack agreed.

"Hey, Jack, did you ever think about it?"

"What?"

"Well, the way things change, well, you know, when it comes to watching football..."

"Yeah?"

"I mean, when it comes to watching football, I mean, do you think we're seeing the same thing?"

Jack looked up:

"No," he said.

"Really? You think there's a difference?"

"Definitely. It's obvious."

"What is?"

"Well, let's say that when it comes to football," Jack continued, "we can watch the same event from different angles. But, at the same time, we get to enjoy it differently."

"Oh."

"So, for instance, there are those people who watch football and, instead of being interested in the actual sport, they just keep their eyes on the players. And they don't really pay attention to the score, or anything like that. So, you can imagine what it would be like if the game was actually played that way? Well, they'd see the players moving about, and kicking the ball to one another, jogging, doing whatever, but they wouldn't know the score. And so what? It means nothing. It's meaningless."

"Right. Yeah, makes sense," Charlie agreed.

"But then," Jack said, raising a finger, "there are others—people such as yourself—who might be interested in the game itself, and how it all works. You might want to understand what the goals are, what the rules of the game are. And then, of course, if the players were going to play, well, they'd get the scores right, but when they scored they wouldn't give the goals, the matches, or anything like that. But, for example, if the game ended, say at 3-2, well, it would probably show them celebrating, and shouting, and jumping around, and they'd say, 'we won!' "

Charlie glared at Jack with a sort of blank look.

"Well, we got beat, but we lost in the third round. We only made it as far as the second round, and then the Chinese knocked us out. It didn't last long."

The TV was on.

The commentator was speaking:

"And that concludes the match. We'll now go to an interview with the English captain, Doctor Matthew Waugh."

"What are you doing?" Charlie asked Jack.

Jack was staring at the screen:

"Well, he's the captain, isn't he?" He said.

"Yeah, but what does that matter?"

"It means something. Look, he must have a degree in something, and they always ask him what his major was."

"So?"

"Well, what is it? What did you study at university?"

"What are you talking about? I told you, I've never been to univer-"

"Oh, come on, Jack, just tell me, what did you study in college? What's your profession?" Charlie said, grinning.

Jack looked up. Charlie wasn't looking at him. He was watching the TV set.

The interviewer spoke:

"How does it feel to lose your chance at immortality in front of a crowd of millions?"

Doctor Waugh was talking in a flat nasal voice:

"Well, I'm disappointed, of course, and I guess it was a bit disappointing, even though I knew the match was going to be hard, and, you know, it would probably take some magic to beat them, with the way our economy has been lately. Bloody Tangs..."

Jack smiled, and then, suddenly, he laughed.

"I don't know," Doctor Waugh said, "you could say we got what we deserved. It would have been nice to win, but the important thing is that we gave it everything. No regrets, no complaints. We did the best we could."

Then the screen went dark.

They had left the pub.

Jack and Charlie walked across the street.

There was no one in the alleyway.

It was just them.

"Look," Jack said, "I don't mean to be a jerk about it, but you know, what really bothers me is that I don't believe it. I mean, the way they make it sound-"

"Yeah? Why?" Charlie interrupted.

"Because," Jack continued, "if he knew the score, well, then, it would be obvious, wouldn't it? That the only reason they

were losing is because they weren't making any moves, and it was just a question of time before they caught up. They'd figure out a way to score."

"Well, they might, Jack, but you don't think so. It's not like we just went in there and they hit us on the side of the head, and then we woke up later in the hospital."

"No, I guess not. The way I see it, they were just playing a defensive match. Nothing they could do. They were doing what they were doing for all of the game. It was the only game they could play. You know what I'm getting at?"

Charlie frowned.

"I'm thinking," Jack continued, "that maybe when we saw it in action, it all kind of worked that way, and when you saw it all in slow motion, it looked like a bad game."

Charlie was silent for a while:

"I don't get what you're driving at," he said.

"Well, I'm not saying anything, am I?"

"No, but I'm not sure why I should. I haven't asked you about what it was you studied in school."

"You're right," Jack was shaking his head, "that's not how this works," he said.

"Sure it is," Came the reply.

Jack & Charlie go to South America. Cap. VII.

THe rover made its final stop. The Andean peaks of Peru loomed onto the horizon and quickly began to tower over them, as they ascended into the highlands. Even through their windows, they could see them growing taller and taller, and closer and closer, as they traveled up into the vastness of mountains that seemed to go on forever into infinity, beyond their view,—until they finally rounded a bend and came upon a place—a valley—an oasis of green lushness surrounded by towering mountains that seemed as though they would reach up into the sky like gods reaching down from heaven towards their mortal children below.

It was early morning when they arrived in the valley. It was

very cold, but they were lucky enough to find several small cabins with heaters inside of them, along with several large campfires still burning in front of them that had been lit days earlier, but, luckily, were still going strong. They built themselves a fire inside one of these cabins and they soon warmed up once more, as they sat there for several hours, sipping hot tea and smoking their cigarettes out of small glass pipes, while Ometecuhtli told them stories about his country; how it was once ruled by a hero named Chimalpopoca who would fight the Aztecs with his feathered serpent-spined war chariot. How he had driven them from the land and forced them to migrate south towards Peru, where they could never return to their homeland in Mexico. How he had built himself a great city with gold and silver in Cuzco, and how he had fought again with the Mayans, but this time he had won. How he had conquered the Inca empire and founded an empire of his own that would later grow into what we know today as the Moche empire. How his genius had led him to construct an empire that conquered lands and peoples, that had never been conquered before. How he had been seen as so great a leader, that he was said to have been able to make any land fertile and well-watered, even though he couldn't read or write. How he had conquered all of South America, except for the very south. How he would have invaded this land also, but ended up being assassinated by his own cousin Terremoto. How Terremoto was banished for his crime but then later returned with an army of warriors from far away lands like Arabia, Egypt, and even China. How Terremoto had conquered Cuzco with his armies, but would be defeated by Terremoto's son Masipi. How Masipi would go on to conquer nealry all of South America, except for one landlocked country called Kallawaya. How Masipi would be defeated by Terremoto's son Quemu. How Terremoto's son Quemu would be defeated by Terremoto's son K'ahuna. How K'ahuna would be defeated by Terremoto's son Tezcatompok. How Tezcatompok would be defeated by Terremoto's son El Tepantecatl. How Tepantecatl would be defeated by Terremoto's son Tezcatomto. How Tez-

catomto would be defeated by Terremoto's son Bactenco. How Bactenco was defeated by Tepantocatl's son Atahuallpa. How Atahuallpa was defeated by Tepantocatl's son Atzlafatl. How Tepantocatl would be defeated by Tepantocatl's son Tsunamisongaltecihlihcahtlintecatl. How Tsunamisongaltecihlihcahtlintecatl would be defeated by Tepantocatl's son Sajeltecuhtli. How Sajeltecuhtli would be defeated by Tepantocatl's son Tlacateopanemaltecuhtli. How Tlacateopanemaltecuhtli would be defeated by Tlacateopanemaltecuhtliicaxtl. How Tlacateopanemaltecuhtliicaxtl was defeated by Pacha Ina, the god of the storm.

They all laughed at this last story. The Moche empire had been great, indeed.

"I think we should build ourselves a pyramid here," said Charlie, "a great pyramid."

"You do realize we're in Peru," said Ometecuhtli, "that pyramid you're thinking of is in Egypt."

"We're all very well aware that we're in Peru," said Charlie, "but that's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about building a pyramid here, in Peru, so that we can honor our great friend Ometecuhtli."

Ometecuhtli smiled, and continued explaining:

"You see, the Anti-Aztec Andean Alliance was formed over twenty years ago by a number of civilizations and peoples, such as the Inca, the Moche, the Chachapoyas, the Chimú, the Huari, the Cuzco, the Tawantinsuyo, the Vilcabamba, the Qulla, the Collas, the Chancaníes, the Acllacu, the Nahualli, the Cunturis, the Pizzaro, the Tarasacan, the Collas, the Cunturis, the Huari and the Chachapoya,—as a means of protecting themselves from the Aztec empire and its war machine. They have succeeded in doing this, so far."

"The Pizarros, I've heard of 'em," said Jack, "aren't they the descendants of the that bloke who went round the world on a donkey?"

"Yes," said Ometecuhtli, "that is correct. The Pizarro family was one of the many groups of people that fled from the Aztecs.

Pizarro was a Spaniard who was enslaved by the Aztecs and then escaped. He traveled across South America and eventually reached Peru, where he founded the city of Lima."

"How did he get here?" Asked Charlie, "I mean, he had to have been a lot older than me. I don't think I could ride around the world on a donkey."

"Well, the route was different back then. You see-"

"No," said Charlie, interrupting Ometecuhtli, "I don't want to hear about it... All right, Ometecuhtli, let's talk about what we are supposed to do next. You drove us all the way over here. Clearly you have some plan in mind."

Ometecuhtli grinned. His teeth were yellowed and stained with wine and tobacco, but they gleamed still, through his dark beard and mustache.

"Oh, yes, Let me tell you about the United States of Amezcua. It is based on the principles of democracy and individual freedom, although there is also absolute monarchy. We elect a president every five years, and each state is free to choose how much power it wants to give the central government. Here, among the peoples of the A.A.A.A., we call these states 'republics,' but in Amezcua they are called 'states.' Each state has its own constitution and laws. Every citizen is allowed to vote, and any male or female may run for office, if he or she is qualified. Anybody who is not a citizen may be drafted into service during times of national emergency. If a person is found guilty of treason against the country, he or she is executed without trial."

"All very democratic," said Charlie.

"It works quite well," Ometecuhtli replied.

Ometecuhtli thought to himself, considering these two men he was sent to take from the clutches of the Triple-Alliance by any means necessary, and realized that they were clearly resourceful, courageous, and likely stupid enough to be deceived.

"I have a proposition for you two," he said.

He began to explain his plan: "You see, the Triple-Alliance has been working for years to control and monopolize the production of coca in South America; if we can smuggle it into our

land without their knowledge, then we will have a commodity that could potentially fund the operations of the Anti-Aztec Andean Alliance."

Jack and Charlie looked at each other with shock written all over their faces. They both knew this was way out of their league, but they also apparently couldn't help feeling excited by the danger and challenge presented before them.

Ometecuhtli rolled on, explaining how he had connections inside Mexico, who could provide resources such as vessels that would be capable of smuggling large amounts across hundreds, or even thousands of miles, while under constant pursuit from authorities, eager to shut down any activity related to drugs trafficking, in order keep up a good standing within international communities.

With these details taken care off, all Jack and Charlie needed to do was gather intel about the routes through which the coca would be moved, and ensure the merchandise was well hidden during passage, and recruit any additional personnel, if needed. And finally, guarantee the product reached its destination intact. In exchange, Ometecuhtli offered the two Englishmen a percentage of the profits to be made from the sale of such commodity. It was an ambitious plan, but with the right set of skills, it could work.

Jack and Charlie looked at each other with a mix of excitement, apprehension, and a bit of terror. It seemed too big a task to take on, but then again, they thought,—why not?

"All right," said Charlie, "let's do it!"

The next morning, Jack and Charlie met Ometecuhtli at the hotel where he was staying. They registered for a few days so that they could make some final arrangements, while they waited for the cargo to arrive. Then they took their leave with a promise of return in a few days time, to begin the next phase of operations.

"Where are we going next?" Asked Jack, as they left the hotel through the rear entrance, reserved for guests of the establish-

ment, with vehicles parked out back for those who wished to leave by carriage or by horseback.

"I'm taking you North," said Ometecuhtli, his stony face floating in the still air over the lake, as he held out his arm to guide Jack and Charlie across the cobblestone street towards their carriage, in which sat their servant Rigoberto.

Rigoberto was a man of Spanish descent, about twenty-six years old with long blond hair tied up in a tight ponytail on top of his head. He was short and stocky with broad shoulders and a muscular build. He had one tooth missing and also had a scar running along his left cheek, from an incident which he had survived when he was just thirteen years old.

"Ey, Juan and Carlito, you know that this mission is dangerous? I know that I only met you a few hours ago, but time is like a tide,—it goes fast, fast, fast until it's too late..."

"We've been through worse," said Jack with a smile, as they got into their carriage.

Rigoberto was silent as he sat behind them in the carriage as it slowly pulled away from the hotel and onto the cobbled street. For some reason, Jack did not think he would live long. He wasn't sure why, but he felt that Rigoberto was doomed and had pushed his luck too far already. Something kept telling him that Rigoberto would die before they arrived at their destination.

"Say, Charlie, what do you think of the Andean peoples?" Asked Jack, once they were underway.

"Well, they are a bit different from what I've read in the books. For one thing, their women are pretty. I mean not like me of course." He added quickly as he flicked his thumb towards his own face where a scar ran across his forehead from a childhood accident involving hot coals, from an oven being placed too close to his face while he was eating bread. It left a scar that ran along his forehead about three inches long and two inches wide, that was viable only upon close inspection.

He continued speaking about his knowledge of the Andean peoples: "It was a common practice among the Andean peoples

to eat large amounts of raw potatoes and corn, in order to appease an appetite that had been brought on by weeks of eating little food, after having traveled through the highlands, where food was scarce, after having been forced to hike for weeks on end over steep mountain trails. It was an even more common practice among those who ate large amounts of raw potatoes and corn, to be unable to get an erection after having eaten so much raw potato and corn that it made them impotent."

There was a brief pause, and nobody spoke.

"They also like to make out, though," he added as he looked over his shoulder with a grin, "and they like to kiss a lot."

"That's interesting," Said Jack absently as he stared out the window.

Suddenly, the carriage stopped.

"What is it now?" Jack asked.

Charlie turned around and saw Rigoberto standing beside the carriage door with a look of concern etched upon his face.

"You're wanted at the inn," he whispered.

Jack and Charlie climbed down from the carriage. They walked past a small group of men waiting outside the front gate to the main building of the inn and entered the courtyard between the two buildings.

The sun shone brightly overhead and there was a pleasant breeze blowing across the yard. There was a fountain in the center of the courtyard filled with water flowing over stone blocks. A couple of young girls stood near the edge of the pond holding hands and staring into its depths, as if lost in their own private thoughts. One girl wore her black hair in a braid while the other let hers hang loose. Both were slender, with delicate features and soft brown eyes. Each had dark red lips that matched perfectly the color of their dresses. They seemed to be of Huari extraction. Neither of the girls paid any attention to Jack and Charlie as they passed by.

Inside the main lobby of the inn was another group of men, sitting around, talking quietly amongst themselves. All of them were dressed in finely tailored suits and hats. Some of the men

had mustaches, others had goatees. All of them appeared to be wealthy businessmen.

The reception desk was manned by a middle-aged woman wearing a crisp white dress-shirt and tie under her navy blue jacket. Her hair was tightly curled beneath a neatly trimmed gray wig. She smiled pleasantly at Jack and Charlie, as she greeted them with a warm welcome.

As soon as Jack stepped forward to greet the woman, he noticed that she had something strange stuck inside the neckline of her blouse. A bell rang loudly above the entrance doors and everyone turned toward the sound. A man emerged from the double set of wooden doors leading to the dining room. He strode purposefully down the hallways of the lobby, ignoring the curious glances cast his way as he headed directly for the two visitors.

"Good afternoon!" He called, as he approached the, "welcome to our humble establishment! I hear friend Ometecuhtli has informed us both of your arrival this morning." As he spoke he removed his hat and bowed slightly to show respect: "and we thank you for allowing us the honor of serving such distinguished guests as yourselves," he continued, "we have prepared rooms for you, at no extra cost. Please follow me."

Without saying goodbye, or giving either Jack or Charlie time to reply, he led them to a hallway. When they reached a stairway, he held open the top step for them to ascend, before turning away without looking behind himself:

"Enjoy your stay at the inn," he said, simply. Then, he disappeared down the stairs, leaving Jack and Charlie alone again.

Jack and Charlie arrived upstairs to find guards stationed outside the doors to their separate rooms. Realizing they had been betrayed, Jack's expression did not change, as they opened the doors to find an ambush party of Motilón warriors, including a leader with a painted face mask. The warriors had bolas and swords and set up barriers so neither could escape without facing death or harm. Jack could tell the leader was strong—despite his short stature—from observing his well-defined arms.

Charlie knew they were beaten, so he braced himself. Silence filled the air around them while four warriors surrounded them. The leader stood ahead, a mask with yellow and red painted patterns on his face. Jack could tell the man was strong, his arms heavy with scarred wounds. No attack came, and for some minutes, nothing happened, as Jack and Charlie just stood there, waiting for an attack that never came. Then the two felt tranquilizers penetrate their skin.

The world suddenly faded to an endless void. Nothing remained but the distant echoes of a warrior's bellowing commands ringing out over the empty abyss. Somehow, time had passed,—a cruel hourglass emptied of its grains of sand and unanswered questions.

When Jack and Charlie awoke again, they were rudely thrust from their tranquility. Ropes bound them to cold wooden chairs in a dank cellar. How long had they been unconscious? Hours? Days? Years? They would never know.

Charlie's head swam, as he staggered back to awareness. He and his companion both peered about in something resembling terror, attempting to comprehend the events that had brought them here. From the black void loomed a hulking figure, dressed in costly attire. An Atacama man—standing over six feet tall—broke the oppressive silence by proclaiming:

"Welcome to my wife!"

A chill swept over them as they beheld his emotionless countenance.

The rest of the exposition boggled their minds even more, revolving around mystical wagons, a golden key, and the impending fate of all mankind...

"Hello, hello, hello!" Jack snickered, head and heart practically purring with mischievousness, "you'll have to pay for this!"

The Warrior's words swirled around in Charlie's mind like so much dust caught in a predatory gravity: "Welcome To my wife!" Could the answers he needed lie within the walls of this damp basement, or was he already dead? Only time would tell.

Finally, the Atacama kingpin spoke again:

"My name is Tlaloc Apu-Huallano," he said, with a deep and powerful voice, "I am here on behalf of the Aztecs, who are paying me to sabotage Ometecuhtli and the Anti-Aztec Andean Alliance governments. We have been trying for weeks now to disrupt their operations and take control over their drug peddling in this town. I can assure you that it is going precisely according to plan. So, no one has realized what we are doing."

"Well, what's that got to do with us?" Said Jack, "we haven't even been fully debriefed. We've got no horse in this race."

He was answered with a fist to his face.

The Atacama man rose and began to rant in a feverish pitch: "You know nothing of the Aztecs! All these fools who use mountains as their refuge,—they do not understand that what I bring is *life*, and *power*, flowing from sand, like water cascading down a waterfall!" His fist slammed against the wall in frustration, "the Aztec Empire brought us this gift many lifetimes before, transporting it across oceans with no resistance. What about you? What did you bring to our beloved mountain cliffs? Nothing but your ignorance!" He spat on Jack's face as he continued his tirade, "and now, even those lazy sacks of spit have come knocking at my door,—seeking aid, while they spread their filth across new lands! Just look at Europe,—can't you see how much easier life would be if only an ounce of *sand* had been alongside them on their voyage? No, they were too lazy and weak to bring the sand to themselves. Their whoring brought them to our home, where now we all suffer from their endless pestilential poverty! What do they do when they have a problem? They throw curses at each other! Day after day they work on their farms and buildings, just so that they can sleep in peace when darkness comes. Even their shadows mock our love of light and thunder,—not you as well, you backward island boys!" Apu-Huallano sneered, "the Tuaregs brought sand to your miserable isle, but you ran screaming like a little child at the very sight of their camels and obeahs... You and the Inuits, —you tried burning it, buried it, even threw it back at them. All are asinine methods of dealing with power that is not of your

hands, and so I dub them failures,—failures which drove them to us and our gifts of sand. The Atacama were just like you in our ancient history... Only after destroying everything and everyone that got in your path, could you see those lands as yours. So hot and cruel were your souls, that the Tuareg had to come and temper your barbaric rage with this most generous substance..." Apu-Huallano fell to his knees in supplication. His face merged with ecstasy and pain as he cried out: "Do not take the gift of sand away from the rest of the world! Let our old customs fade into memory, consumed by the marvelous light pouring on us all! You must believe in the truth. No one with sand has ever been harmed or killed by the humans made of stone, but pray tell,—HOW MANY OF YOU HAVE HAD TO FLEE FROM OTHER HUMANS!?" A mocking laughter erupted from the Atacama man, "the A.A.A.A. took away our righteousness, they took away our taste for life!" Apu-Huallano beseeched his gods with an inhuman passion, and then, calming himself, stood up and spoke: "Now, take these two criminals and dunk them into the sacred cenote in Arapa. I'm sure you still remember the way; the very pile of human bones and waste lies at the bottom of that cesspool. Those who have had their blessings taken away, have thrown themselves into it with their arms tied behind their backs. Arapa is a lake of despair! Only at its deepest depths does justice play itself out!" He clenched his fist tightly as it shook in front of him, "but ask these two if they feel any sorrow!"

"I'm feeling kind of parched," Jack quipped.

The kingpin's face contorted into a twisted scowl.

Charlie snickered: "No, don't cry out to your false gods, pale child! They are no use to you now."

Apu-Huallano turned back, his smirk gleaming like a polished saber: "Perhaps you gentlemen have some ideas of your own for how to solve this problem? I'm sure two clever minds such as yours can come up with something much better than chucking yourselves into a cenote!"

Jack and Charlie shared a sly grin before plunging into a pas-

sionate debate of solutions they had acquired from sea captains, merchants, anglers, and various others.

"A floatin' dock!" Jack declared, "it'd be grand, ye know, so's the ships can move 'round in shallow water."

Charlie eagerly agreed and threw in his two-cents:

"Yer right, Jack. I reckon we could build a big sandbag structure, or maybe an artificial reef system. Heck, it'd give us something to do when we ain't fishin'!"

Charlie laughed again, before throwing back another dose of snappy comebacks: "If I don't fish, we all die!"

Jack leaned forward and said: "What about when you're sleepin'? What if we got hungry while we were sleepin'?"

"Well, I guess we could go fishing while we were sleepin'," Jack offered, "that way we'd always have fresh fish for breakfast."

"But what if we didn't catch anything?" Charlie retorted.

"Reckon we'll have to go to bed with no fishes then," Jack muttered, "that'll be the jig, if the blooming things elude us."

"What if we run out of grub?" Charlie inquired, "what if we've nothin' left to eat?"

"Ye'd only go a few hours without scoff," Jack stated, "just enough time to rustle up some baps from the wheat we have. And we've plenty of that,—no joke."

"What if we have a tiger causin' bother of the rapacious variety?" Charlie continued, "what would we call it if it were a cannibalistic vampire tiger or something like that?"

"We'd get rid of it with the old bang-bang," Jack told him, "do ye think we'd live with a tiger on the rampage? Not likely, we'd just pop it, and that'd be the end of it."

"But what if it's a trick, and it attacks us anyway?" Charlie insisted.

"Well, we'd shoot it, Charlie, there's a lot of places we could aim our rifles, right? And, if the rifle is loaded, we'd shoot it right between the eyes."

"That would be a satisfying moment," said Charlie, "yes, I'm getting an erection."

"You, my friend," Jack, stated, "you're gettin' an erection

over something that doesn't exist. It's a hypothetical. It's something that can never happen, and never will."

"But what if it did?" Charlie pressed.

"If it did, it would mean we had made poor decisions, like we did the time we got on a small ship and had to drink whiskey so we could sleep in a bed. So, that hypothetical tiger rapin' scenario would mean we were running around a jungle, naked, drunk, and hungry. We were like two common nocturnal animals. That's what that scenario means to you. You don't know it, but that's exactly what it means to me. This isn't Harvard."

"But I have two tests!" Charlie protested.

"Yeah? Lay them out."

Charlie began to lay out his tests: "First, a mouse is sitting in a cage, when a tiger bursts in and eats it. You and I, and everyone in this room with us,—is the mouse. You could have done something to change that, right?"

"Yes, we could have," Jack answered.

"We didn't, and we didn't do it. Would you like to tell me what else could have been done?"

"Well," Jack began, "the other option could have been the mouse's girlfriend,—the mouse's wife."

"Yeah, but the lady mouse was on vacation."

"Exactly, Charlie, that's what we mean. This isn't about dinner. This is about our lives. To us, it's not about fish and women, it's about choosing between the two of them."

"You see what I'm getting at, though?" Charlie inquired "the 'choice' thing is totally hypothetical. It's like if you and I and everyone in this room with us, and a tiny car, and some other things that you and I can't even imagine,—went to the store, and we bought a huge box of twenty-five different kinds of beans, and some fifty kinds of canned meat; some hundred types of vegetables, fifty kinds of dried fruit, and a hundred different kinds of dried bread. Now, I'm not saying we should ever be allowed to eat that many different kinds of beans, but I can guarantee you that we would not eat twenty-five. That would

be beyond excessive, it would be like eating too many crackers with a cream and cheese spread on them."

"Now, that's a realistic example, Charlie. I don't think there's any doubt about it, unless there were people that didn't know how to read maps."

"Then we shouldn't have ordered the box," Charlie agreed, "and, we should have switched our order to ten cans of beans, ten varieties of canned meat, ten kinds of dried fruit, and ten kinds of dried bread."

"I'm getting what you're trying to say, but, if we did that, we would never get to read a novel, let alone understand it."

"So, that hypothetical example means that we're too busy eating to understand a novel, and if we get to the point where we have to choose between reading and eating, we will most likely stop reading, and then we will probably die."

"That's a plausible scenario, Charlie. You could be correct about the stuff that comes after the first two sentences."

"Now, Jack, let's move on to the second test. Which is a 'would I have had a family' in that scenario?"

"Yes," Jack answered.

"Which means that we could have become parents, like the mouse did, like we did, and if we did, our children would have eaten different kinds of beans."

"You're a genius Charlie," Jack laughed, "that's exactly what you meant."

"I didn't mean to imply that this could ever happen, because it probably couldn't, but, I'm saying that, you see, that's one of the alternatives that, quite frankly, I didn't know existed. It's not a life choice, it's a life experience."

"I like what you're saying, Charlie, but if we were a woman, then what?"

"Well, I don't know if there are any generalizable points to be made, but I would say that every time we could possibly be in that situation, the same kinds of 'life choices' come into play, —the same rules that 'all people make, all the time.' That said,

we aren't a woman, and we weren't made with a vagina, so it's not really analogous."

"No, but there are lots of circumstances that are analogous," Jack pointed out, "take a drug addict, say, or a hard-core alcoholic. Now, the goal of addicts and alcoholics isn't necessarily to live a full life; it's to function within a narrow set of circumstances. Let's say, I had to eat rice and beans. That wouldn't be a life choice, it would be survival. The fact that I was starving wouldn't change the fact that I had to eat rice and beans, it just changed how much rice and beans I could eat. The same thing with any person who is capable of either becoming addicted to alcohol or, more commonly, becoming addicted to something else. Now, my point here is not to equate addiction with malnutrition, but simply to point out that all of these experiences have the same roots, the same base principle."

"What's that?"

"Self-preservation, Charlie, and, I don't think you can say that all these people choose to be addicts or alcoholics; but, when they do, they are not making an informed choice. They are making a self-preservation choice. Again, if they were a woman, the chances are even slimmer, but, there are certainly people out there who are healthy and robust, and they can't drink or smoke. They make the same kind of self-preservation choices that I described as a man. They try to eat as many colors as they can, without dying, at least as often as they can."

"And, how would that work with reading and with eating?"

"What I'm trying to say is that I know what choices exist, but I can't know what your choices will be until you make them. I know that my choices won't be similar to yours, but that doesn't mean that they won't exist."

At this point, Apu-Huallano flew into a rage, his eyes burning with an intensity that the captives had never seen before. He lashed out and bellowed:

"Silence! You fools think you can reason your way around every problem, until it meets suit to your desires? No! Your choices will only be made by me!" With that, he pointed at each

of them with a giant stick, "now, obey or suffer my wrath!"

Charlie sat back while Jack stood his ground, debating in an even tone: "What you say may be true, Apu-Huallano," he said, calmly, "but that doesn't mean our choices won't exist. It simply means we must think more carefully about them before making them."

Apu-Huallano scoffed in response and waved the stick menacingly at Jack, as if to intimidate him into assent. But, despite this seeming threat of violence, neither Charlie nor Jack conceded the point they had been arguing so passionately, over only moments ago, instead, Charlie went on to say: "The thing is, Apu-Huallano, no matter what choices we make, there will always be consequences. That's the nature of reason,—to weigh our options and consider potential outcomes before making a decision. So, while your position may give you power over us now, ultimately that power only lies in influencing the types of decisions we make."

Apu-Huallano listened intently to their words, but remained unconvinced; he continued waving his stick, as if ready to settle this debate formally, through physical means, rather than philosophical discourse. However, he halted and said:

"I am the embodiment of the vulture of mediocrity and the blood of pretension! I eat all that stands in my way. You, you are no longer standing in my way! Not anymore! Now you are merely my supper!"

He raised the stick over his head.

Charlie thought fast and found a way to use his companion's obstinacy to his advantage, finally finding a way out of this madness: "Wait!" he yelled, "I have another idea: What if we could choose not to be different from other men and women? What if we could choose not to be men and women at all?"

Apu-Huallano stopped, lowered the stick and said:

"An interesting proposal! Prove it!"

"Well," Jack interjected, "what if only some men and women could choose at all? How would we decide which ones?"

"Very true," Apu-Huallano said, pondering the possibilities.

He paced around, lowering his stick and dragging it on the floor: "There are no easy solutions here," he said, "only complex choices that must be carefully weighed against each other."

Both Jack and Charlie seemed to be surprised by this sudden shift in attitude. Before they could stop him, Apu-Huallano had already continued speaking:

"Yes," he said, thoughtfully, beginning to pace back and forth at the front of the room again, "it's not enough that we simply act on instinct,—we must also consider our motives carefully, if we are truly going to succeed."

With that, he abruptly stopped pacing and smiled maliciously, as his gaze passed over them both one last time:

"Now," he said, "you have an idea of what I'm asking for when it comes to making decisions about your own lives,—choose wisely!"

"But Mr. Apu-Huallano," said Charlie, "don't you know choice is just a construct of reason? We can never create something without thinking about it."

Jack nodded in agreement.

The two locked eyes with Apu-Huallano.

Apu-Huallano looked from one to the other and then back again; his face betraying no emotion. After a few moments of silence he finally spoke, saying: "Your argument is convincing, yet I still refuse to accept it. Until you can indisputably demonstrate that, with enough opportunities, rationality will triumph over impulse,—we are done here."

His voice was laced with fury, rising each syllable, the spittle of his ire clinging to what breath remained. With that, Apu-Huallano turned abruptly and without another word walked out of the room.

Jack let out a deep sigh, while Charlie merely shook his head in disbelief; they had both been so certain they could get through to him with their reasoning, but, in the end, it seemed as if none of their efforts had made any difference at all.

"Blimey," Charlie uttered, "we've got him proper riled now."

"Right-o," replied Jack, deep in contemplation, "right-o..."

Jack & Charlie go Scuba Diving. Cap. VIII.

ON a windy and overcast day, Jack and Charlie were walking along a parapet, observing the seas.

"Hey Jack, lets go fishing," said Charlie.

"Alright, then. But we need to get some gear first."

They searched around the seaside town and found a shop that supplied fishing and camping gear, along with other various outdoor and aquatic items.

Charlie slammed a tent on the counter:

"Alright mate, make this sinkable."

"What?" The cashier said.

"Make this tent sink-a-ble. And I don't mean put a sink in it, I already have sink in it," he snickered to himself.

"Excuse me sir?"

Charlie glared at the cashier, not blinking once:

"Listen mate, I want you to make this tent sinkable, so I can be under water with it."

After two hours of harassment and several failed phone calls to the local police guild, the man caved in and strapped several heavy objects to the tent.

Charlie was happy to pay the 200 pounds—a clearly arbitrary pricing, given the circumstances—as he was happier that his tent could now sink.

Jack, having been silent this whole time, standing directly behind Charlie,—as if waiting in line—finally spoke up and asked the, now emotionally and physically exhausted cashier: "Hey can you make my cigarette light underwater, magic-man?"

"The cashier ran out of the store, holding his head as if attempting to keep something from escaping it."

"Well, I guess that's a no then," Jack said, putting the gun back into his pocket.

They arrived at the beach.

"Hey Charlie, why do you reckon they call it 'the English Channel,' you cant change it, but you can surf it."

"That's the thing Jack, I've only boogie boarded."

At that, they shared a brief moment of silence.

They walked off into the English channel with their spear-guns and scuba gear. Charlie pushed his, now sinkable, tent in a wheelbarrow, straight into the waters, and Jack followed along.

After a while, once they had went deep enough, warranting the use of flashlights, they set up the tent and made camp in the depths of the English Channel. However, by this point, they had tired themselves out, and were unable to go ahead with their planned spear-fishing activities. Given this, the two soon fell asleep in their sea-beds.

The sandy bed had been transformed into an aquarium by the oddly high amount of living creatures around them.

They both awoke and assessed the situation.

"Hey Jack, what do you think is disturbing the fishes?"

"I don't know, Charlie, but whatever it is, spear-guns probably aren't enough."

And then the mermaids appeared, swimming madly around in a tight circle, jumping through the water, squealing like rats.

"Did you see those mermaids?" Jack asked.

"I do," Charlie answered, "you must have mistaken them for sea nymphs. Their wreaths are for lanterns, not for their faces."

"I didn't mistake them," said Jack, "I know what sea nymphs look like. I've seen them a thousand times. There aren't that many mermaids in the sea, are there?"

"Oh, there's plenty, Jack. I do wish they'd hurry up and leave." He was unhappy to have even met them.

The youngest and the oldest were trying to get him to follow them, but Jack stopped him.

"It's such a beautiful night," Jack said.

"Don't you want to see what we can see?" The creatures said.

They kept appearing, you couldn't pretend they weren't there. You could only run away. And the more you ran, the bigger they got. Jack was a real man. He didn't have to be scared of ghosts or mermaids. He could kill a kite with his bare hands, yet he could feel his heart in his throat.

"Come on," he said, "we need to get going."

Jack swam after Charlie. It was darker on the beach than it had been in the sea. There was nobody to talk to. There were no stars to follow. There was no moon. It was so dark, he couldn't see the sea.

Jack crawled across the sand and, as he looked back, he saw a host of mermaids in the waters. He laughed at them, and they swished back and forth. Then, they vanished. The whole thing had been a trick, Jack had said.

"I don't believe it, Jack! There weren't any mermaids in the water at all."

They went over to the cliffs. It was cold. They were actually both terrified.

"Hey Jack," Charlie said, "why is it that we can hear each other underwater?

"We're not under water Charlie."

"I mean, when we were, then."

"Nitrogen narcosis I suppose..." Jack said, "was it a trick Charlie? Do you think the mermaids were real?" Jack looked at his hands, almost dazed: "Why do you do that?" He asked himself, "why do you always ask things like that? Why do you want to know so badly? Why are you trying to cheat the darkness? Why are you doing this?"

Jack wiped his face with his hands.

"What if it's a nightmare?" Charlie said, "what if it's just in your head?"

"You can always wake up.... But if you don't, it might be a lifetime..." They both wanted to believe, but they weren't sure in exactly what.

Jack & Charlie Visit a School. Cap. IX.

Charlie called out to his friend Jack.

Jack stopped and looked inquisitively:

"What's the fuss Charlie-o?" He said.

"Why, Jack, its an abandoned house, Jack!"

They had reached a great fenced yard, with the moonlit Thames a good way off. The blind dog leapt, but, in the dis-

tance, they could see the burned-out shell of an ancient mansion whose brickwork and red tiles had turned black and gray. All was black, except one corner, which glittered brightly, on which shone a kerosene lantern, and a spark lit up a figure's black clothing and dark face. Jack stopped, and examined the sign over the door.

"What did you call this place?" Asked Jack.

"It's an orphanage, of course," said the voice, which came from the darkness inside.

"Oh I see," Charlie said, "it's not an abandoned house, it's a house of abandonment!"

"And I'm supposed to go in?" Jack said, glaring at the portly man who came out of the light, leaning on a silver-headed walking-stick: "Some godawful place like that! I'll just nick my glove, Charlie, and be off to-morrow; it can't hurt you to have some education. Come on!"

"My name is Jim Evans!" The man said, "well, let me offer you what comfort I can, for the mistreatment you're about to endure. I'm the steward of the *Hillcroft Home for the Blind*, which you'll find to your left, about four hundred yards, and on the right is a churchyard, wherein is one of our residents, a poor old chap called Paul Stuart; he's harmless and affectionate, and you can speak to him. So, off you go to the school, tomorrow at eight o'clock sharp. Good-bye now."

Jack and Charlie looked at each other quizzically.

"But what is this place?" Jack said, "we haven't a notion where's it's meant to be?"

The two men looked about them. A dim light shone through the iron grille of the gate. The air was cold and damp. There was a cold wind at the top of the garden, and it rustled the leaves. A bird chirped, and the night-flowers, whose throats had been upturned, or, rather, flattened against the ground by some winter frost, drooped their petals.

A few people passed by, neither turning their heads, nor daring to look in the direction of the school. Jack cursed, and looked about him, but found nothing but an old tree and a

rock, and they had walked too far for him to retrace his steps.

Charlie whooped, and the two of them set off at a run down the garden, and out into the night, and ran a short way along the gravel road, before they ducked into a doorway which, except for the crumbling wall which fell in at the angle, was all that remained of a shop. They listened for a moment, and then Jack said: "Well, at least they're in peace."

They went up two narrow wooden stairs and into a half-starved kitchen. Two fat women were rolling tinned potatoes about a great stove. They looked up when the bell rang, and put down the pans when it was answered.

"And here are two in need of school!" Said the fat woman., "hurry up, and get them on their way!"

The two friends hastened down the stairs, and Jack said to Charlie: "Let's go, Charlie; I don't know much about him. He may have to pretend he's blind. Then we can pretend we're in the blacking-out business."

They went out the door and turned a corner. Outside, in the dark, a boy with a shotgun was standing. He aimed it at them, and made a contemptuous gesture.

"Come on then!" Jack said angrily.

Charlie took out his pistol: "Well, what do you want, kid?" he said, "there's no fog that thick, no matter where you are."

"You, geezer," said the boy, "are a dead man, if you don't go back where you came from."

"I don't care," said Charlie.

"Ah," said the boy, "so you say."

"I'll blow you down the bloody street!" Jack said, angrily, "you'll be blind before you go more than five yards!"

"You want to try me, mister? Well, I'll show you! There! I'm ready to let fly!"

"Well," said Jack, "I might as well let you have a try."

Jack reached under his coat. There was a bulge there.

"What is that?" Said the boy.

"What is what?" Jack answered.

"That-" the boy began.

"You'll see when we get on the move," Jack cut him off.

"Yes sir, that's what I am. I'm the killer of bad boys."

"Now, listen," said Jack, "there isn't any fog. It's just a bit of fun. Now, go back to whatever it is you were doing before we disturbed you, and mind your own business."

The boy looked at him thoughtfully:

"What's your name?" He said.

"Charlie."

"Come on, Charlie," said Jack.

"I suppose you'll shoot me," said the boy.

"No," Jack said, "he won't have anything to do with you."

The boy looked at Charlie suspiciously:

"All right," he said, and went away.

Charlie shrugged his shoulders:

"Can't help it," he said, "he seems to have thought that I was going to try and kill him. If he'd only look at us properly, he wouldn't be so rude. But, I can't blame him, really; I can't see my nose, and I don't know why the hell I don't get shot when I go into a place. Maybe they think I'm trying to get away from something or other."

They stumbled upon the entrance of an ancient edifice; the door creaked ajar. The two chums stepped through, the fire within warming their faces.

"Where are we?" Charlie quizzed, and Jack pointed to the label in front of them, it announced: "The School for the Blind."

"I'm utterly befuddled," Jack said, "well, we came from a gaff back there, a house. And there's pea-soup fog every which way, so, I reckon we've ended up on the wrong side."

"I do not fancy being blind," Charlie uttered.

"Oh, yes," Jack agreed.

Charlie smiled, but the smile looked a little nervous:

"Well, let's just try this thing," he said, "if that fool boy says anything about our guns-"

He opened his mouth, and his hand went inside it.

They went into the school.

Jack turned to Charlie:

"What do you reckon this room was for?"

Charlie pondered this for a moment, and then said: "Well, suppose there were children sitting about reading newspapers. They had a great many things on their desks: Pencils, pens, scissors, paper, notebooks, inkwells, and inkpots. And that one man read a book of verses aloud to them; another wrote letters with his pencil. A third was cutting out designs for a dress. About thirty of them, young girls, boys, and grown-ups. Clocks and children and ladies, ladies and ladies and ladies and ladies and ladies and ladies, ladies and ladies and ladies... A room of women."

The home was dilapidated, and its inhabitants had all gone. In the hall there were doors which led off into darkness.

"Let's get this straight," Charlie said, looking around.

"It is all very confusing," Jack agreed.

They went outside by the front door where they found a big bell and a noticeboard. There were some notices pasted on it:

"Don't go alone, don't talk to strangers."

There were several names under the words: "Paul Stuart, Henry Jones, Mrs. Jones, Miss Evans."

Jack looked at them carefully: "I think we've come to the right place, anyhow."

Charlie gazed at him quizzically: "What's that supposed to mean?" He asked.

"I don't know," Jack said "we'll go on, anyway; perhaps there will be somebody in charge."

The two friends went down a corridor into a large room where there was a fire blazing.

Jack & Charlie Refurbish a Boat. Cap. X.

Abdul and Walid worked to move away from the shore, venturing out into the Mediterranean. The sun shone bright in the sky and the sea was calm. They were focused on managing their small boat with experienced helmsmanship. Once they had gotten out to sea, they relaxed. However, Walid noticed what seemed to be two men floating in the waters. Thinking that these were drowned or drowning people.

They steered the boat towards them.

Soon enough, they were met with two strange-looking Europeans who were simply floating in the water, apparently having a conversation.

The lack of life-vests disturbed Walid, but he halted his superstition and the two helped the men onto the boat.

One of them was a balding middle aged man wearing a blue flannel shirt; the other was a slightly younger man with a black beard, wearing a poorly made kimono. Both of them appeared to be quite strange; the older one was especially so, to Walid's senses. Abdul was likewise unnerved, but gave praise to Allah that they had not died.

"This is a strange boat," said the younger man, in an affected high-pitched voice.

"You two must be very strong to have been able to drag us out here," the other one added.

"We are not strong, but we are blessed," Walid answered.

The younger man had a strange look in his eyes. He was looking at Walid, then he turned to the bald man.

"I don't believe you," he said, "you must be the strongest man on Earth," he cackled.

"Where did you come from?" Abdul asked.

"From a different world, I think," said the younger man.

"What do you mean?" Walid inquired.

"I mean," said, the younger man, who Abdul was beginning to wonder was not younger at all, "that we are just chums, floating around the Mediterranean on some kind of vacation."

"What?" Said Walid.

"Well, you see, we have been looking for a boat to take us from one place to another," said the younger man.

"A boat? What sort of boat?" Abdul asked.

"Well, something like this one."

"Yeah, this boat is mighty fine. But, permit me to say, it could use better rudders," the older one added.

Abdul could hardly believe what he was hearing.

"I thought you were drowning," said Walid.

"That is so," said the younger man, "but we had no intention of dying or anything like that. We were just floating around the Mediterranean on vacation, I guess you might say. So, if you don't mind, would you be so kind as to take us where we want to go?"

"Where do you want to go?" Asked Walid.

"Why, we'd like to go to Africa," said the younger man.

"Africa!?" Walid exclaimed.

"Yes, Africa."

"You want to go to Africa?" Abdul asked.

"Africa, yes."

He turned to the other man:

"That right, Charlie?"

Charlie shook his head: "Absolutely not, Jack."

Jack and Charlie cackled again in unison. They began to make jokes about drowning.

"Look, we take you with us," said Abdul, "you can get help when we reach the port."

"No," said Charlie, "we are on vacation. We came out here looking for the exact same boat we have found in another part of the Mediterranean, but, I see you found it first. We are absolutely in love with your boat. It's about the right size, just right; everything. It's just the perfect boat for us."

"This is bizarre," said Walid.

"No, no, no," said Charlie, "we're really serious. Why, it's only fitting that we be the first ones to have this boat, since it's the perfect boat for us. I'm Charlie, by the way, and that's my buddy Jack." He pointed to the man who was standing at the rear of the boat, "that's my friend Jack," he said.

He kept his finger suspended in the air while looking pointedly at Abdul and Walid: "We have come here to make improvements on the boat," he continued, "we thought of it ourselves, and we wanted you to have the best vessel possible to take you through the Mediterranean. We're some sort of engineers, and we know what needs to be done."

Abdul and Walid looked at each other, bewildered.

"What do you mean by 'improvements?' " Abdul inquired.

"Blimey!" Jack declared, "we've got ourselves a proper pickle! To have a fighting chance at steerin' the ol' girl, we best be tinkering with the rudder and adjustin' the sails. We can also spruce up the rigging and give 'er a good waxing to keep rot away. I daresay we should have 'er ready in no time!"

Abdul and Walid were utterly taken aback. These two men seemed to be completely mad. What did they want?

Abdul and Walid took a long moment to absorb this. In fact, they did not absorb this at all.

Walid's head was starting to hurt: "What is this?" He demanded, "we have no idea what you're doing and why."

"You're right," said Charlie, "I mean, I just thought I'd mention that I'm a pretty handy fellow with a screwdriver, so we'd be able to get the ol' girl ship shape in no time."

"No you're not, you're talking nonsense!" Abdul protested.

Charlie looked offended:

"Jack is a wonderful engineer, and I'm not a bad mechanic. I know my engine, and I know how to change a tire." He turned to Walid, pleadingly, "don't let this man fool you."

Jack hummed: "I think the rudders could use a bit of leveling," he said, "I think I can fix the engine, at least. Also, I think the winches need attention. Perhaps some paint, and some welds. We could easily get the boat to sailable condition."

Charlie laughed: "How about a nice new coat of varnish?" He added, "and maybe add some lights. You know, to help lighten the load, so to speak."

Abdul stared at him incredulously:

"You want to put lights on our boat? This is madness!"

"Oh no!" Cried Jack, "not those horrible lamps that you Arabs seem to prefer. No, no, nothing like that. Just simple solar panels. That way we won't have to worry about any batteries getting wet. There's plenty of sunlight out here, even when the weather turns dark."

"Solar panel!?" Abdul repeated.

"It'll be worth every penny," Jack insisted.

Abdul sighed deeply and rubbed his temples:

"These men are insane..."

"Nonsense," said Jack, "just because you are not familiar with our customs doesn't mean that we are crazy."

Abdul glanced over at Walid, who looked more than a little frightened.

"It's true," Charlie said, the rudder could use a bit of fixin' up."

"There is nothing wrong with the rudder! Go back to the ocean where you came form!" Walid protested.

"Look," said Jack, "we didn't expect much of anything from these two fellows, but now we feel that we owe them a great debt. If they hadn't saved us from certain death, well, perhaps we wouldn't be alive today."

"They are going to drown us..." Walid muttered under his breath.

"That's not true," said Charlie, "we're here to help. We believe in the power of a good ship, and we want to make sure that it can sail the Mediterranean sea as best it can."

Abdul and Walid looked at each other with a mixture of suspicion and confusion on their faces. It seemed that these two men knew exactly what they were talking about,—but why would they do all this for them, and what was that thing about taking the ship?

Finally, Abdul spoke up:

"What if we don't agree to this... improvement?"

Jack and Charlie shared a knowing glance before Jack replied: "Well then, we'd be terribly disappointed, wouldn't we now? But mark my words, you'd be doing yourselves a disservice to deny the opportunity of sailing upon such an impressive ship!" He winked, "and besides, you never know when you will find yourself stranded somewhere. Wouldn't you rather have a reliable craft that you could count on?"

Abdul and Walid exchanged glances again. Both were quite convinced that these two men were insane.

"We'll do a real spic and span job; shine the boat up. Kind of like," Jack paused and pulled out a pistol from his still wet ki-

mono,"kind of like this. Look at that, look at the shine."

Abdul and Walid were frightened, but said nothing.

"That's nothing Jack!" Charlie said, producing a weapon as well, "mine's shinier."

"But it's not a gun Charlie, it's a knife."

"Well, yes, but I like to call it a gun, you know?"

Suddenly Abdul spoke:

"Alright, you can have the boat."

Jack and Charlie both nodded in agreement.

Walid's eyes widened, but he kept quiet.

The four sat silently for a moment, staring off into space.

Suddenly, Jack broke the silence:

"I have something else to tell you both. We don't actually know how to operate the steering wheel properly yet. I'm afraid that we may accidentally send you crashing into rocks or reefs."

"That's alright," Abdul said nervously, "I need to discuss something with my friend here, about the boat, yes?"

"Fine by me," Charlie said, while carefully examining the shine of his knife.

Abdul and Walid went to the other side of the boat.

"Brother, listen," Abdul whispered, "we need to get off right now, these men will murder us."

"Get off?" Walid asked, "in the middle of the sea?"

"Worked out for these two..." Abdul replied.

The two deliberated for a moment and decided take the chance. They jumped off the boat. Jack and Charlie seemed to take no notice as the boat sailed on into the distance.

The two sailors floated there for a while. The conditions were beginning to affect them badly. Abdul felt something touch his shoulder. He swore in Arabic:

"Damn fish! Blasted fish! Allah curse you, fish!"

Suddenly, he heard Walid say: "Allah is great."

Abdul and Walid had both been touched by the same fish.

Walid spoke up again:

"Do you think Allah will hear our prayer?"

Abdul nodded solemnly:

"I know God hears the cries of those in need, and we do not deserve to be left here alone like this. But, I fear we have angered Allah somehow, or perhaps he has simply lost us, so, I wonder if it matters if our pleas go unheard?"

Walid thought about this for a moment: "No, we should pray," he said, firmly, "God will listen, I am sure of that. Even if there is no answer to this prayer, the act itself will remind God of us. If we do not ask, then we are not praying."

Abdul sighed: "Yes, Walid... let's pray."

The two began praying loudly. As they began to lose energy, they persisted by simply repeating the names of God. But soon, they had tired their voices, and floated in the waters in silence.

Hours passed, the two were on the verge of drowning, when, suddenly,—Abdul spotted a ship in the distance.

"Alhamdulillah!" He yelled.

He started calling out to it, and Walid joined him.

The vessel got closer, it was a boat. It appeared abnormally clean and well geared. A lifebuoy with a rope attached landed near them. The two sailors looked up in terror. It was the two strange Europeans on their own boat, grimacing down at them.

Jack & Charlie go to Africa. Cap. XI.

Alright, Charlie, lets go to Zambia."

"Zambia, Jack? You mean the Moon-land?"

"No, Charlie, the Moon revolves around the Earth, on which Zambia exists."

"You mean the Moon technically revolve around Zambia?"

"Sure, the Zambian would have you believe that, just like how some of our unusually proud countrymen would."

"The sun revolves around England, that's why it never sets."

Jack laughed.

"But, yes, Jack, we surely made a lot of Zambian Spirit Dollars from our hostile takeover of the Moon's pimping industry."

"Well Charlie, I wouldn't describe it as hostile, it was..." he struggled to find the words for a moment, "it was... infernal!"

"Shame we can't spend any of this Zambian Ghost money."

"Who would have thought that deceased Zambians were being spiritually processed in a lunar-brothel."

"I still don't believe that, Jack, it goes against my philosophical convictions."

"You've got one of those?" Jack said, "I thought you just got a new haircut."

Charlie rubbed his clean-shaven head and responded:

"I've got three actually. But, anyway, if we could cash in these spirit-dollars, we'd be blazin' millionaires of some kind."

Jack thought for a moment while examining the money, it was made of clay and consisted of various shapes with impression on them that Jack could not understand: "I suppose we could trade currencies with the Zambians," he said, "I wonder what the exchange rate is."

"What's an exchange rate Jack?" Charlie said, trying his best not to grin.

"Well, you see, you know how things get exchanged, right?"

"No."

They existed in silence for a minute or two.

"Well," Charlie said, "it's off to Zambia then."

After a month of preparation and travel they had finally landed in Zambia. Jack and Charlie were sitting in a run down bar near the runway, while their sizable cargo of Zambian ghost money was being unloaded.

Jack was drinking a glass of seemingly legitimate Jack Daniels, which—depending on when he was asked,—was named after himself, which he liked to believe.

Charlie, on the other hand, was smoking a pipe, into which he crumbled some of the local hand-rolled cigarettes, which he bought from an emaciated boy that was running around the airstrip selling these products.

"What industrious people..." Charlie thought aloud.

He was highly amused by Jack and his abundant and voluminous consumption of alcohol, as many of Jack's family had an illustrious history of drunkenness. Jack himself was only following in their footsteps.

Meanwhile a caravan of donkey carts, pulled by plodding oxen, surrounded the bar.

"Ah, finally we're here, what are you going to do with the money, my friend Jack?" Charlie said, with a chuckle as he sipped his drink.

"You know I plan to buy a gazelle..." Jack replied.

"Gazelle?... you want to buy a gazelle?... God... you have the most sophisticated tastes in the entire galaxy. In any case, Jack, what sort of gazelle are you after?" Charlie asked, not bothering to look at Jack, as if he was unaware of the conversation.

Jack thought for a while, there were a few different types that he had in mind: "I might just have to ask the gazelle to write poetry for me, he's a writer of some renown," Jack said absent-mindedly

"So, *giselle-style*, you want to have him jump on your back and write a poem on you, what about this one Jack?"

Jack thought for a moment, he had never really thought about this. He had no idea if this sort of thing even existed, and besides, the Africans were known for their lofty literary and philosophical sentiments, especially the Griots who occasionally lit up a cigarette and a beer, usually after a few pints of Zamani.

"Well... I think I'll go with the following one..."

Jack called a man, who he assumed was a waiter.

The man lazily came over.

"Tell me where the witch-doctor is."

The man appeared confused.

"The grand witch-doctor of Zambia!" Jack demanded, slamming his fist on the table.

The man looked bewildered: "Why? Do you need him to cut off your cock?" He asked.

Charlie coughed out a laugh.

"No, he's probably the best doctor in the whole world," Jack said, "he can cure me of many diseases, including erectile dysfunction and the desire for young girls. Not that I have either of those. I don't... I'm just saying he can cure them. I think he should come here."

The waiter shrugged and walked away and, a moment later, a group of heavily armed men, wearing ceremonial masks, walked inside. Jack recognized them as part of the local militia, but he knew enough not to ask any more about them. They sat down at a table, and the waiter returned shortly afterwards.

"A shot of tequila, if you please," Charlie ordered, as he made his way to the bar.

Jack took a quick sip of the Jack Daniels, its flavor brought him immense comfort. He was looking at the bottle in silence for a while, thinking hard about his options. As he sat there, waiting, Jack thought back to all his life's experiences so far, and he concluded that he had never had any fun or any happiness. That's why he decided to drink more of the Jack Daniels, for, as far as he was concerned, he was drinking himself.

He had just finished his second glass when he saw Charlie coming towards him with two glasses, each containing a full bottle of the brown liquor.

"Hey, Charlie, this whiskey has got the best name ever... Jack Daniels... I'm telling you, this is the perfect brand for me!"

They heard a loud and thunderous roar, along with the sound of the men's boots clanking on the wooden floor of the bar. They looked over and saw that all the patrons of the bar had left, except for a handful of locals who were watching the action with a curious expression.

There stood the grand witch-doctor of Zambia. The man's name was Doctor Nkosi Jomo Kenyatta-Dlomo.

His skin was the color of polished ebony, and his lips resembled a pair of lips that had been dipped in red paint. His eyes twinkled, but they lacked the normal human shine that people normally possessed.

He was wearing an old faded purple robe that reached almost to the ground, and he was holding a large staff in his hands. As he entered the bar he raised one leg and stomped on the wooden floor with the force of a locomotive. There was a deafening noise, and then everything began to shake. The windows were rattling, the tables and chairs were shaking, and the

bottles of Munkoyo were rolling around on the dusty floor.

The Witch-Doctor approached Jack and Charlie, his staff held high in his hand and his face illuminated by the light of the sun, which was pouring through the windows: "My friends," he said in a deep voice, "I have received news that you are in possession of a large amount of Zambian Ghost Money."

Jack and Charlie both stood up.

"What? Why didn't you say so?" Jack said, as he looked at Charlie, "well, I guess that means we're rich. I mean, we're certainly richer than we were."

Charlie nodded silently, as if agreeing with everything Jack was saying.

Doctor Kenyatta-Dlomo pointed his staff at the ground and spoke: "The ghost-money is now part of the Great Zambian Treasure Vault. This moment shall serve as a symbol of the true nature of this land's wealth, which is in the hearts and souls of her sons and daughters. However, we are aware of your strength as pimps and purveyors. So, in accordance with tradition, I propose we resolve this without bloodshed-"

"So, you see, Mr. Witch-Doctor," Charlie cut in, "the money belongs to us, and we are entitled to have whatever percentage of it we choose."

There was an uneasy silence.

Jack thought long and hard about this, and then his face broke into a wide grin, and he looked at Charlie:

"Are you interested, Charlie?" He asked.

Charlie stared at him, his face was blank. He did not seem to notice the large audience that had gathered.

"Mr. Doctor, the money is ours, and we intend to cash it in," Charlie said, as Jack attempted to anticipate the words and say them in unison.

"Absolutely not," Doctor Kenyatta said, "the money belongs to us. I challenge you to a game of Zulu Chess, to decide its rightful owner."

Jack thought for a moment:

"No," he said, "the money is ours."

"I will not allow you to undercut our brothels with your cheap tricks. I demand the right to a game of Zulu Chess with you!"

The witch-doctor raised his arm again and shook the staff, the windows rattled again, an empty bottle of Mokoyo fell, spilling the last glass on the ground.

Jack's eyes became sharp as diamonds. He looked around the bar and the crowd looked back at him.

"You think you can intimidate me?" Jack snarled, as he clenched his fists, "I'm going to show you what happens when a man like me walks into a place like this... Now, I will give you one chance to leave peacefully."

The witch-doctor smiled.

"You've got five seconds," Jack added.

The witch-doctor raised his staff and shouted:

"Ha-ha-ha, I can smell the fear in your blood!"

The witch-doctor turned and went outside.

There was a thunderous noise, it seemed to emanate from beyond the walls of the bar.

Jack and Charlie looked at each other.

"It's a fucking battle Jack!" Charlie yelled, as he picked up the bottle of Mokoyo and took a swig.

There were screams from the crowd outside, and everyone in the bar was looking towards the door, as if they were expecting a hero to emerge from the crowd.

Jack and Charlie ran towards the door.

The sounds of guns being fired and the cries of people came from every direction.

The two of them stopped and looked at the scene before them with horror: The witch-doctor was leading an army of mercenaries, their faces painted in the native designs and their weapons gleaming in the sun. The warriors were everywhere, swarming around the bar like ants.

Jack and Charlie didn't have time to think as they dashed towards a nearby building for cover. Bullets whizzed by their heads, flying through the air like fierce bees. Suddenly, Jack felt

something hot rush past his ear, he had been grazed by a bullet. Then, he noticed that Charlie had dropped to the ground.

He grabbed Charlie off the ground and quickly ran for safety once more. He kicked open a nearby door and threw himself inside, dragging Charlie behind him. They both laid there panting heavily, trying to catch their breath from all of this chaotic activity outside.

Jack pulled out his pistol—an antique, hand-crafted Varmint—and examined it. It was fitted with beautiful Belgian engraved details, it was flawless. He aimed it through a window at a mercenary and pulled the trigger. The bullets ricocheted off the mercenary's body-armor and struck the ground, bursting on impact and leaving puffs of smoke.

The mercenaries were swarming the crates filled with the ghost-money. A group of warriors was attacking the building now. They quickly ran to the bathroom where the ladies went to wash up when they needed a break from their gazes.

Jack grabbed Charlie and dragged him inside, throwing the door shut behind him. Charlie was staring at him blankly. Seeing that there was nothing actually wrong with him, Jack said:

"I'm sorry Charlie, but we're gonna have to fight these people if we're gonna get out of here alive."

Charlie pulled out his own pistol: "Alright then."

The two of them sprinted out of the bathroom and went around several soldiers, guns raised and aimed at them, firing off rounds. They cleared the room and ran outside. Charlie aimed his gun and began shooting at the warriors. One of them ducked out from behind a wall and shot at Charlie.

Charlie hit him in the head, causing him to fall. Charlie quickly ducked behind a small truck as more soldiers came.

Bullets whizzed past their heads, but they kept shooting, and the soldiers kept falling.

Jack took the opportunity to kill another one of the soldiers as he rushed over to Charlie. He used the last of his ammunition to take down the final one.

They were both panting, their hands trembling and their

eyes wide open. They had beaten their enemies, but they were not free yet. They had to stay alert, as they had no idea how deep the Zambian ghost money went.

Then they heard a voice, a voice that was both strong and wise, it belonged to the witch-doctor. He stood in front of the truck surrounded by the dead bodies of his mercenaries, his staff still held firmly in his left hand.

Jack scrambled to his feet and reached for his knife. He stepped forward and raised it in a defensive posture, as if he meant to strike.

The witch-doctor laughed:

"This is not necessary, my friend! I have come here only to finish what we have started."

He motioned towards the table topped with a wooden chess board which had inexplicably appeared before him: "Let us settle this dispute using our minds instead of our hands."

Jack turned to Charlie and asked him if he wanted to play,—he didn't wait for a response and picked up the pieces and placed them on the board. He knew only some of the rules of Zulu Chess, a game popularized by the Zulu mercenaries who had developed it as a pastime and a way to sharpen the mind, after encountering a similar game among the Muslims.

"I would prefer to see your game face Jack, not that bloody mug of yours," said Charlie.

Jack glanced at Charlie. He didn't reply, he just watched as his opponent as he took his seat in front of the board.

The witch-doctor looked at the two pieces:

"How do you propose to beat me, you have already lost"

"I have not lost, not completely. You have made a serious blunder by assuming that you can simply overwhelm me with your forces," he said, as he set his pawn down, and then moved his queen forward two squares.

"I have studied every piece that you have put on the board, and I have noticed something very unusual. You have left your rooks in the rear, your knight behind your bishops, and your bishop and rook in reserve, as if you expect that these pieces will

be needed for a future battle. But this plan is flawed, my friend, because I can tell you this now, this is the only battle you will ever need to win." The witch-doctor moved his king into the middle of the board and placed his rook directly behind it: "My king and rook are the strongest pieces in the game; they can move as far as the king can. As you have noticed, I am in the middle of the board, and therefore have the ability to control everything from my position." The witch-doctor moved his king into the center of the board, as he was playing a strategy known as the *Karpov Gambit*: "I will place my king in the center of the board," he continued, "and then take control of your king with a rook move. Your king and your rook will be trapped between my king and rook."

The witch-doctor moved his rook and his king into the center of the board, "I'll let you make this next move, it's your move," he said, finally.

Jack moved his own rook forward a single square and then he moved his king, making it impossible for the witch-doctor to trap the king.

The Witch-Doctor smiled, the tension was high. He placed his king at the end of the board so that it was protected, and it would be easier for him to move the pieces around when it came time to take Jack's king. He put his rook in front of it.

"This is a simple plan, to use your king to capture mine, then I'll have the last laugh, because even though I'll lose my king, you won't be able to stop me from taking yours, so it will be a stalemate, and I will claim the victory." The Witch-Doctor moved his knight forward to protect the rook: "Now, let us see who is the real master of the game."

Jack looked to Charlie. They began to whisper, surveying their options:

"I say we let him have our king," said Jack.

Charlie eyed Jack.

The witch-doctor set his rook, he moved the rook to the side of the board and then placed it in its proper place, it was on the opposite side of the board.

"You have seen my moves, now it's your turn to make your move. Do you want to give up your king, or do you choose to let me have your king, which means I will win the game?"

Jack glared at the witch-doctor with rage in his eyes:

"Don't think for one second that you have what it takes to beat me." He looked back at the board and moved his king into the central position. The game continued. The two men played with the same intensity.

Jack's patience was wearing thin as he watched the witch-doctor continue to taunt him. His smile grew wider and wider with every move. It had become clear that he was enjoying the game more than he should.

Jack kept his focus on the board as he considered his next move. Then, he saw it,—his chance to knock the witch-doctor's king into the corner.

His eyes widened, he didn't want to believe what he was seeing. There were five possible moves that could win the game, and there was only one choice left on the board.

They paused.

The Witch-Doctor looked at them and spoke:

"Do you know why Zambians go to the Moon when they die?" He said, with an air of pride, "it is because there is a mystical energy that has been imbued in the Moon, and it is said to be made of cheese. This is not literally true but *spiritually* true. The realm of the Moon is said to be a place of connection between Heaven and Earth. It symbolizes purity, clarity, and truth, in Zambian culture, and therefore it is also believed that on the Moon one can find 'cheese prostitutes'—mythical beings who will take care of any Zambian spirit as they transition into the afterlife in their thousand-year journey among the stars. The metaphysics behind this belief lies in Zambian understanding of cosmic energies and how these energies are balanced with those on Earth, therefore creating a gateway between our world and the spiritual one. The belief behind this spiritual journey speaks to a need for clarity, understanding, and even transformation or elevation for those Zambians who go on this journey.

When visiting the moon, it can often serve as a refuge from the chaos experienced in life, to find true peace and harmony. It can also serve as an opportunity for those seeking knowledge, enlightenment, and understanding of the mysteries of life, as it is a place where all secrets are revealed... You see, boys, it is not just the trials and tribulations of life here on the Earth that one must face. There are also extraordinary spiritual realms beyond our own, places of power and mystery that can only be reached through our dreams. These are the places Zambian souls go to reflect and transition into eternity."

Jack and Charlie looked at each other in awe, and Jack suddenly proclaimed:

"We own the cheese brothel on the moon!"

The witch-doctor's eyes twinkled with mirth as he laughed at their absurdity: "Such a thing cannot happen under normal Zambian circumstances. The only cheese-moon-sex one can partake in,—is among fellow Zambian souls in transition."

"But we've shagged a bunch of them!"

Doctor Kenyatta-Dlomo stared at the two, his expression filled with fury. After a few moments of silence he spoke in a low voice: "You have done much more than I have surmised..."

Jack moved his king with lightning speed.

The witch-doctor's eyes opened wide as he saw Jack's king approaching the rook:

"This is your last move my friend, it's a stalemate!"

Jack smiled.

The witch-doctor's expression changed and he began to sweat. His rook was moving fast, it was heading towards the king, but it was blocked by the king's protection. But it still wasn't enough, he was too slow, too cautious. He couldn't get rid of the king before his enemy did.

Then, Jack heard a loud bang.

The witch-doctor's head had fallen off and landed in his lap.

Charlie fired one more shot at the witch-doctor's heart. The few cautious spectators that remained,—screamed and ran.

"So, what are you gonna spend your share on Charlie?"

"Oh, I don't know, Jack, probably some hookers and beer. Oh, maybe a hot tub, or a new car. Why? What are you gonna do with yours?"

"I don't know. I suppose it depends on how long we've been out here. Let's see... If we got hit with a couple of meteorites... If it lasted about two and a half years, then we'd be safe for another three years."

"What are you talking about? I don't understand."

Jack shook his head: "I don't know either, Charlie, I'm just saying that if the meteorites came once a year, we'd be okay for two hundred years at least."

The waiter from before approached them and showed them the brand new packet of cigarettes. He struck up a deal of 50KZ ($2.40 USD.)

"No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no..." Charlie said, while thinking about the 50KZ he would be spending on the decent cigarettes. He had known for many years about schemes involving highly taxed cigarettes, with the result that he would get back half of the price, but that was not the point. With a casual and sure approach he pulled out his penis from his cargo shorts and made the waiter wait: "What was that?" Charlie said quietly.

Jack regarded his friend, and then looked to the visible Moon in the clear sky. He muttered something under his breath while pointing at Charlie's penis: "There's always someone who has a bigger one than you..." They were both quiet as they looked around at the death and destruction that now polluted the airstrip. They decided to call this place "Jack and Charlie's Valley," just for now, until they knew what it was really called.

Jack & Charlie Have Insomnia. Cap. XII.

THe wheezing wind and the seething smoke were all Jack and Charlie had to take away from the frozen blasts of frozen fog.

"I wouldn't mind it so much myself, if we didn't have to go," said Jack.

"Why not?" Charlie replied.

"I've got a good reason for 'not.' How is it that you don't know, though?"

"Because there are plenty of jobs, and they always have new ones for me when they're bad enough, and I don't like taking the chance."

"Oh, it's not that. There are some men who wouldn't be heard of if they don't carry on. Of course, I can't blame you for that, but we've got to look out for ourselves."

"I'll be thinking of you, Jack."

They turned to go.

Charlie came back to where he was standing:

"I think there are women's jobs for you, Jack," he said.

"Oh, no, there are plenty of men's jobs for me too, in this sort of a place. I've had my fill of women's work."

"The place, I mean, Jack, is the town, if we ever get out of here; not the mountains."

"You're really worried, aren't you?"

"You won't know unless you try."

Jack waited a few minutes, then he went off too. They followed the little path, which was rather rough underfoot, but the wind and the fumes were not too much of a hindrance, and before they knew it, they were at the edge of the town. It was not a welcoming place. There were people smoking and scraping at the black stuff from the drains. Men hollering in the streets, and one of the bootleg halves stumbling out of a side-door into the gutter.

The buildings were dirty and somber, and the rusty ferries rattled along the quayside. All around—in the yards and out on the quay—lay a crude accumulation of broken beams, rusted carriages, and other detritus of a previous time.

Charlie felt at home, and Jack felt a little uneasy. They had no idea how long they had been gone. Perhaps it was not very long, for they had not missed the smoke and fumes. Yet they were very conscious of being out of place.

"You know," said Charlie, "I am very well acquainted with

those country places where the men are all priests, and the women are all spinsters, and they are always holding prayer meetings."

"Oh, a parsonage would suit you in a minute," said Jack.

"No, I can't stand all that silly..."

Jack looked at him.

"...Prayers that is," Charlie finished, "they go on for hours."

"Yes, they do."

"At breakfast time too."

"Oh, what a nuisance. I wouldn't care to have people making a fuss of me when I was eating."

Jack laughed at this, and he tried to imitate the drowsy manner of his companion.

"I can't get to sleep at night if I've got people coming up and knocking at the door; and if they talk... what a bother."

"Oh, it's dreadful!" Said Charlie.

"I'm so sorry, Charlie."

"A fellow can't live like that."

"Oh, they're all my friends."

"They may be," said Jack, "that's why I don't want to live like that myself."

"I wouldn't want to."

"Well, you would, if you could. I am glad I'm not like that myself; it's no life at all. There are no men like that in Northamptonshire, that's certain."

"Ach, I hope you're not, I hope you're not..."

"Me? Who'd want to be a priest, you know, especially in this day and age."

"I don't know Jack, I'm not sure. But, when they see us together, it does startle them. Then they look surprised. That's a man and a woman sitting in a room together."

"You make it seem so queer. You should laugh."

"Of course I should, Jack, but you don't know the business, do you?"

"No, it just makes me nervous, that's all... My God! I was in

this town with *Billy Latham*, and he was a priest. I thought he must be. You know, everybody thought he must be a priest."

"I suppose you think you're clever?" Said Charlie, with a caustic edge to his voice.

"Oh, very clever!" Said Jack.

"Good! That's all right. Let's have another beer."

"Another beer?" Said Jack, looking at him incredulously.

"No, another drink, not another beer. Another drink I said!" Said Charlie with a cold eagerness, "one more drink."

"But Charlie, you're afraid of drinking?"

"I am not afraid of drinking, Jack, I'm afraid of staying."

"You're afraid of staying in this parlor with the moonlight shining in? That's very pretty to see, you should like it. You should drink in a different room altogether; one where it's not so bright, you know?"

"I do like it. What I like best of all is going to that village in the country. There I don't feel afraid of drinking in any house."

"I believe you do," said Jack, laughing.

"Oh, but I have something on my mind," said Charlie.

"What is it, then?"

"I was telling you how you'd get down about drinking in the country. I know what a good deal of ale and wine I like."

"You should get up in the morning and have a good strong cup of coffee. And I should like to see you on a Sunday morning, just getting up, to see how you're feeling. You're never out in the sun, and it's a real disadvantage, isn't it, at that time of day, with all that wool on?"

"I'll look better if I get up," said Charlie.

"I ought to take you to London."

"I'm not going to London, Jack, I don't think."

"You ought to, we'd be going down for a march."

"No, I won't."

"You ought to. You haven't changed much at all since you were in the army."

"I haven't changed a bit, at all. I'm not going to London."

"You ought to. I shouldn't ask you to; I'd only make you suspicious."

"I am not going to London, Jack, I never want to see London ever again."

"What makes you think you won't?"

"I never want to see it. I've had enough of it. I can get on much better here." With that, Charlie sprang from the sofa and, walking to the other end of the room, opened the door which led to the staircase.

"I'll have to come up with you," said Jack, "I won't be able to get to sleep if you go on thinking so much. Here, get my seachest off the table, you can sleep in it. I've got a dog-cart which can hold two."

Charlie considered his scheme, with his characteristic coolness. Then, with a slight change of expression, he nodded.

When the door was closed, Jack—reclining on his sofa—faced the easel with the lamp before it. It was nearing midnight, the moonlight shone through the window.

A lamp was burning on the table, it was like a rising sun, there was a feeling of misery in the light of it, and a touch of dreaminess.

On the easel was the usual caricature, drawn by Charlie, depicting a woman with her head thrown back and a pipe in her mouth. The lamp cast a shadow on the wall, and the lines of the drawing were slightly blurred.

Meanwhile, Charlie, drawing on a long pipe, struck a match, and the lamp flared up. Then, exhaling deeply, he placed the pipe on the table and turned down the lamp. The room had a cold stillness, it was like the silence that reigned after a storm. Suddenly, Jack was there, he spoke in a low voice, saying:

"Shall I tell you a joke?"

"I am tired."

"We must have a joke before midnight."

"How droll."

"Haven't you a minute till twelve?"

"Don't make it. I am tired."

"I don't make jokes at midnight, for the same reason that I don't make up rhymes at midnight... why?"

"Because I don't know a good one at that hour?"

"Never mind, I've got one to tell, it's an old one."

"I am tired."

"Knock-knock."

"Who's there?"

"Jack."

"Jack who?"

"Jack Frost."

"Cold hands, warm feet?"

"Not really."

"Cold feet, warm hands?"

"Not really."

"Ahem... come on, I'll tell you: *Knock-knock.*"

"Who's there?"

"Charlie."

"Charlie who?"

"Charlie Clack, Charlie Clack, Charlie Clack."

"That is the best joke I ever heard."

"All I say is, it'll get me to sleep tonight, for it's so darn good. Now don't get so impatient."

"I want to tell you a joke," said Charlie.

"Sure."

"All right. It's as follows: Two brothers were walking through the desert. As they walked they came to an old decrepit carriage. The brothers explored it, it was empty, except for a trunk and a cot. They began to dismantle it. As they did so, they found a dead man. 'Look what we've found,' they said, 'well, put him back in,' said the old man. 'Don't be such a fool, he's nothing. He's only a skeleton, and you can't call a skeleton a man.' 'All right,' said the old man."

"He was just a skeleton?" Jack asked.

"You can't call him nothing either."

"All right. I'll do no such thing. But I'll tell you something about him."

"What?"

"He was a magician."

"Oh, what did he do?"

"He could turn himself into a skeleton."

Jack burst out laughing.

The two sat in silence for a while. Insomnia had fully seized upon them both. The clock struck midnight. Charlie moved away to sit by the fire. Jack remained in a corner, facing the easel. Neither made a move. There was silence, there was stillness. Then, Jack said in a whisper: "You ought to laugh, Charlie, when you hear this story. It's very funny."

"Go on then."

"You remember I told you that I went down to this town once, with Billy Latham? Well, I don't know whether he was a priest or not, but he used to wear a black cassock. You know, he had his own church somewhere. Anyhow, he was going to marry a young woman and he was going to do a sort of ceremony in her house."

Charlie looked up with interest: "Well?" He said.

"Well, I can't quite explain it. I didn't know much about the business, but I knew that he was going to get married in the house, and I thought he must be a priest because everybody thought he was a priest. So, when I saw him I asked him if he was a priest, and he said 'no,' and I asked him if he'd been a soldier, and he said 'no.' And I thought that he must have been something else altogether, and I said to myself: 'I'll find out some day.' "

"Why?"

"I couldn't help it, curiosity got the better of me. He was going to marry this girl, and she wanted him to stay the night, and so he stayed in the parlor, and I slept in the kitchen. In the middle of the night, I woke up, and I felt uneasy somehow... I wasn't sleepy, I was scared stiff."

Charlie smiled faintly, he listened attentively.

"It was dark, and the room was quiet," Jack continued, "but I could smell smoke in the air. At first I thought it was some-

body smoking tobacco, but then I realized that it was a peculiar kind of odor,—a mixture of sweet and bitter things together."

Charlie nodded.

He thought about how they were both suffering of insomnia, that devilish ailment, that affliction of artists.

"I lay awake for hours," Jack resumed, "at last I fell asleep again. Quite unlike tonight. When I awoke next morning the sunlight streamed through the windows, it was early yet. I rose quietly and crept across to the window and drew aside the curtains, it was still bright daylight outside."

"Ah!" Charlie exclaimed, "that reminds me of a story."

"Do tell me," Jack said in response.

"Well," Charlie began, "it was a few weeks ago when I had one of those terrible sleepless nights. I decided to take a walk to clear my head. As I strolled through the city streets I spotted an old church at the end of a cobblestone alley, and I decided to explore it. There seemed to be something captivating about it. The door creaked open and I stepped inside, only to find myself surrounded by darkness and silence. Suddenly, a woman appeared in the corner, she was crying softly and seemed afraid of me. I won't pretend I didn't understand the gravity of the situation, but something inside me sent me into a trance-like state. I couldn't will myself to move. She started to plead with me to leave her alone, but I just stood there staring at her, spellbound. Before I knew it, she was lying on the ground beneath me—my hands firmly holding her down,—but I hadn't moved, it was as if she made me rape her. I clung to her body like a vice, refusing to let go despite her desperate screams and violent thrashes. I was determined to complete what I had set out to do, and nothing could deter me from my mission. My cock slid into her cunt as I tried to find pleasure in her pain. Every single time my thrusts pierced her flesh, images of colors and shapes whirred through my mind; beautiful mandala-like patterns that moved in circles with an almost perfect symmetry. Even then, for all the wrongness of what I was doing, I felt myself falling into a trance of sorts, like a dream state where everything is bright and vi-

brant and surreal. And all around me the walls of the church echoed with haunting choral music, swaying me further and further away from reality until I finally reached orgasm. I must have blacked out for a moment. When I regained consciousness I couldn't move. The church was bathed in an eerie light, it seemed like every inch of it was alive with all the secrets it had kept over the years. As I looked around, my eyes fell upon the stained glass windows and I saw that each one depicted scenes of recognition, redemption, and hope. The figures were drawn in so much detail that they almost seemed to move, as if they were part of a living piece of art. Every aspect of the scene spoke volumes, from the textures and coloring to the way each panel connected with its predecessors and successors. Instead of feeling scared or panicked I felt strangely calm and peaceful, despite what had happened only a few moments prior. It felt as though there was a power within these walls that transcended mere human understanding. It was something intrinsically linked to nature itself. When I awoke from my trance, the woman was nowhere to be seen. I cautiously exited the church, feeling a strange sense of emptiness inside. As I trekked homeward, my attention was drawn away from the grisly events to the mesmerizing scenery. My perception was flooded with visions of diamond-like stars that glittered in an ebony night sky, and pristine mountain brooks that meandered through carpets of verdant grass. The atmosphere was perfumed with exquisite odors of wildflowers, forget-me-not's blossoming between ancient twisted trees that created silhouettes over slimy stones and decayed ruins. Butterflies fluttered amidst a panoply of colors, while a choir of birdsong filled the air,—it seemed as if nature herself was embracing me in her arms..."

Jack sat silently, and then burst into laughter.

Charlie looked at him quizzically.

Jack cleared his throat and exclaimed:

"Ah, yes! There was this one time I tried to rape a nun but all she said was 'Habemus Papam!' "

Charlie sniggered:

"Well, one time I was trying to rape a girl in a church but then the priest came in and shouted: 'Abortion is not the solution!' "

"Blimey! But that ain't nothing. One time I was trying to force myself on a lass but all she said was: 'I'm already expecting!' "

Charlie chortled heartily:

"Oh, that's a good one! Well here's one for you: One time I was tryin' to take advantage of a girl and she said: 'Let me go or I'll call the coppers!' so I replied: 'Coppers? Bobbies? Faugh!' "

Charlie laughed uproariously once again.

"You're bloody hilarious today with these japes! But here's the best one of all: One time I was trying to force meself on a lass but she said: 'I've already been violated five times today, so what makes ye think I'd fancy goin' through it again?' "

Jack was in apparent tears with laughter. He held his hand out in front of him, as if signaling for mercy.

"I was telling a story, you know."

"Tell it then."

"Where was I?"

"You had just woken up."

Jack began telling his story:

"I slowly stood, inching my way towards the opaque window frame, then I threw back the heavy curtains to reveal the daylight beyond. Ah, yes,—the sunlight was so bright that it hurt my eyes for a moment. I blinked a few times to adjust my eyesight, before taking in the view outside. Then, as I looked around, I saw that the room had a strange quality to it. The walls were starting to pulse in and out, and the air had a strange, metallic smell to it that seemed to be growing stronger by the second. As I watched, the walls seemed to be moving in closer and closer, as if they were trying to crush me. I started to panic, feeling trapped and suffocated in this strange pulsating space. I looked to the doorway, hoping to escape, but something seemed to be blocking my way out. Suddenly, the room began to spin, and I felt dizzy with confusion. I stumbled, trying to catch myself, but it was too late. I fell to the ground, hitting my

head on the hard wooden floor, and everything went black. When I came to I found myself lying face down on the cold stone floor with a splitting headache. I groaned weakly and pushed myself up onto my knees, looking around blearily for any sign of life. All I could see was pitch-blackness; it was as though I was standing at the bottom of a deep well. The more I strained my eyes to look around, however, the brighter things became... and suddenly I saw them... They were coming for me, crawling along the ceiling and descending toward my helpless form. They were small at first, barely visible against the dim glow of the torches. Soon their numbers grew rapidly—thousands of tiny creatures scurrying in every direction, all heading straight for me. Their bodies were translucent-gray, save for the occasional patch of red or green. I backed away quickly, tripping over the edge of the bed, landing awkwardly on the floor. I staggered forward desperately, trying to escape the horde of insects swarming above me, but I soon lost sight of the exit. A sudden flash of lightning illuminated the entire room. A thunderclap shook the building. I was awake, I had been awake the whole time, but my lack of sleep had brought me to a state of consciousness far beyond normal waking. The swarm of bugs seemed to stop dead in their tracks, as they stared at the source of the blinding light. The flashes were followed by rumbling sounds which gradually subsided to a dull roar. The insects were there, but they were few and far between compared to earlier. Then, after what felt like minutes—but was actually only a matter of seconds—the lights flickered off and returned a few moments later. This time they stayed on longer than ever before, and even the faintest ray of sunlight managed to penetrate the thick cloud cover overhead. For some reason I took comfort in this new development; perhaps because it meant that dawn would break eventually and the world would return to normal. So, I waited patiently for the day to come, knowing that I needed rest badly, but unable to close my eyes in fear of being devoured by these monstrous insects. After several days passed without incident, I began to relax slightly. I stopped hiding un-

der my bed covers whenever the lights flashed, and I ventured outside occasionally in order to gather food for survival. I ate berries from the nearby bushes, drank rainwater collected in puddles, and slept outdoors during the evenings, using my cloak as a makeshift blanket. These simple acts helped to ease my anxiety somewhat, allowing me to focus on surviving another day."

"Heh," Charlie laughed subtly.

"Ah, this just reminds me of a joke."

"Go on."

"So there was this bloke who raped an ant..."

Jack & Charlie Enter a Tournament. Cap. XIII.

AT the bank of the river Thames, Jack and Charlie were passing the time.

"What do you think of that chap who just sauntered off?" Jack asked his friend.

"He's a decent bloke," said Charlie, "I've got nothing to grumble about him."

Jack smiled at this response:

"Why do they call you 'Charlie?' " He asked suddenly.

"Because it's my name in my family. It's as easy as that."

"It isn't really that simple, Charlie."

"Then p'raps I should swap to *John*?"

"If you must."

"Nah."

"Is that a no?"

"It is."

"Blimey..."

They sat and blinked at each other for a while.

"Are you wondering how you ended up with a farthing in your pocket?" Jack asked, after some time.

"I swiped my timepiece and opened it. I felt the gold coin inside the watch."

"Oh, so that's what the man required?"

"Yup, and I gave it to him."

"You see," said Jack, "we have to always be careful when we venture out into the world."

"Nah."

Jack finished his bread.

He looked contemplative, and his lips moved silently.

"What are you ruminating on?" Charlie asked, keeping his pistol trained on Jack.

"Nothing much, but I'm glad you like being known as 'Charlie,' I'm fond of being called *Jack*."

"Nah."

Charlie leaned back and surveyed the river. A ferryboat was anchored outside. Charlie Pulled the trigger. The gun clicked.

"Blimey, we've been given faulty equipment! We've been gypped!" Charlie exclaimed.

"Must've been manufactured by Buddhatek™."

Charlie examined the side of the slide: "Oh... alright then."

The two noticed something floating in the river. They stared at it as it washed ashore close by.

"What is it?" Jack asked.

"Well I'll be... It's a dead body, Jack. And it's got something stuck to its back."

"Alright then," Jack said as he went over to the bloated and almost inhumanly muscled cadaver.

He pulled a dagger out of the back and took the slip of plastic-coated paper from the weapon.

"What is it?" Charlie inquired.

"Looks like a business card with a name and address on it, but I can't quite make out the words."

Charlie peered over his shoulder and read aloud:

"Johannes Blackblood, Royal Assassin... Wait a second, this guy's a professional killer!"

Jack narrowed his eyes:

"This isn't good... we'd better watch our backs now."

"That bloke sure didn't," Charlie added.

Jack started reading: "You are cordially invited to the 743rd bicentennial international martial arts tournament at the Walls

of Jericho, in Judeo-Ottoman Palestine. Fighters from all over the blasted wastes of Earth are invited to attend and prove their skill against one another in various martial arts pursuits."

He read this aloud again, then gave a start of alarm and exclaimed:

"What is this? What does it mean? This is not our business!"

Charlie stared at Jack blankly.

"You don't know what this means?" Jack asked, sharply.

"I do not," Charlie answered.

Jack suddenly rose and began to pace about restlessly. Suddenly, he stopped and turned to face Charlie, who was still sitting on his heels and staring at him in amazement, then he spoke, saying: "You know we have to go to Jericho, right?"

Charlie was silent for a while, but when he spoke, he said nothing.

Jack gazed at Charlie for a while, silence sat between them like a dead dog. Finally, Jack spoke again:

"What is this? What does it mean? This is not our business!"

Charlie shrugged: "Guess we're off to Jericho then."

Jack quickly got up and began gathering his things. He was determined to book a flight with Seljuk Airlines to Jericho as soon as possible. They both knew that Jericho was a special place; it was known for its ancient walls, including the Great Wall of Jericho which had been built in the 12th century by Saladin himself. It had seen many battles between different civilizations, and now it could be their turn to fight against one another.

When the day arrived for their departure, the two packed their supplies into a couple of large bags and made sure to purchase some food from local merchants, just in case anything happened along the way.

As they boarded their flight, Charlie was overcome with a sense of wonderment as he gazed at the landscape below him. He had never seen anything like it before; it felt like he was looking at an entirely different world down there. He snapped out of this trance and they both went into the plane.

CXXXVI. OF JACK AND CHARLIE.

Some time after takeoff, Jack noticed—across the aisle—a very severe and extremely muscular looking passenger. He looked to be Kazakh. The man's features were sharp and angular. He seemed to be wearing some kind of traditional garb; it was mostly gray with hints of saffron in its detailed embroidery. His dark eyes darted around the cabin, as if he were sizing up the others on board, and Jack got an eerie feeling when they finally settled on him.

The man opened his large bag and began taking out a series of weapons: Two curved daggers, an ornately embellished crossbow, four throwing-darts and what looked like several handcrafted throwing-stars. He placed them all carefully on the seat next to his before reclining back with a satisfied expression on his face. It was clear to Jack that this was no ordinary traveler, even Charlie seemed unnerved by this man's presence.

Charlie, for his part, shifted his gaze to another man, and he seemed no less muscular than the other. He was tall and broad shouldered, with a thick braided beard that fell to his chest. What caught Charlie's attention was that he seemed to be performing some kind of physical exercise: His arms were flexing powerfully, in time with every curl of the kettlebell he held in one hand, as he fiddled with the talisman around his neck with the other.

Jack's gaze met Charlie's, then they met the gaze of yet another man. No, they realized,—it was a woman.

An Aleut woman with long dark hair and a powerful physique. Her face was stern and her gaze was intense as she sized up Charlie and Jack, as well as the other passengers in the cabin. She wore elaborate clothing which seemed to be tailored specifically for combat: Several pockets, large enough to fit throwing-stars, daggers, or anything small enough to fit inside. Her arms were heavily muscled and her legs looked like tree trunks.

As if sensing their gazes, she turned towards them, then nodded curtly at them before turning away again with a small but satisfied smile on her lips.

Charlie turned his friend:

"Jack, now don't be scared,—but I'm starting to suspect this might be one of those mobile dojos..."

"Dojo, Charlie? Is that a kind of computer?"

Suddenly, a hulking African figure came to them, interrupting their talk. The man loomed above them, a monolithic figure of strength and resilience. His muscled frame glistened in the setting sun which pierced through the cabin's windows, which were clearly of questionable construction.

He was armored only by his traditional Masai warrior garb, complete with shield and spear.

"Welcome to the tournament, gentlemen," the warrior greeted the two in a confident voice, "I am Oluwafemi, and I will be one of your opponents in the upcoming matches. Are you ready to prove your mettle against some of the best fighters in the world?"

Jack and Charlie exchanged an excited glance. They had no idea what challenges awaited them, or what any of these words meant, but they knew that this was an opportunity they couldn't pass up.

"We're more than ready," Jack replied eagerly.

"Excellent," Oluwafemi said with a smile, "I respect your enthusiasm. Just remember, only those with courage and strength have a chance of succeeding here."

With that, he ordered his drink. The flight to Jericho was long, but the anticipation of the tournament kept Jack and Charlie energized. They spent most of the flight going over their martial arts techniques, honing their skills and preparing themselves mentally.

As they landed in Palestine, they were struck by the beauty of the land. The rich history of the area was palpable and the walls of Jericho loomed in the distance.

They made their way to their accommodations, a small inn just outside the city walls, and then headed to the registration office for the tournament. The registration process was intense, they were asked to fill out a detailed questionnaire about their fighting styles and techniques, and were then subjected to rigor-

ous physical examinations, including blood tests and scans for any performance enhancing drugs. It was then that they realized the seriousness and magnitude of the tournament.

As they made their way back to their accommodations, they were greeted with a surprise. Standing in front of them was the Aleut woman with whom they had shared the flight.

Charlie felt immediately uneasy about her presence; she seemed more than she seemed—more than she should be—but she did not seem hostile either, so he did not object too strongly when she asked for their help in getting something from her room back at her inn outside the city. So, together they walked with her through the narrow streets of Jericho and toward the inn. There they found a number of other people waiting for her and got a good look at the other contestants,—men, and some women from, indeed, all around the world, including, Charlie noted: A Korean man with a black belt who, curiously, wore a headdress decorated with feathers, not unlike that of a Lakota brave. Indeed, as Charlie let his gaze settle on the man, it became apparent that the man was of mixed stock. The man's eyes met Charlie's and he raised his glass-like brows. Charlie smiled faintly, wondering whether he would meet him later during the competition. Then, Charlie saw among these strangers another familiar face,—that of Hans Tung.

"Hans Tung?" Charlie whispered to Jack.

"Hans Tung, dear Charlie, is a world renowned master of the art of T'ai Chi Chuan. His German forename was a product of his father's love for Wagner, whose works he had performed professionally in Germany. Wagner, you see, wrote a famous opera about Tung's ancestor, the legendary hero Li Fu Kao, entitled: 'Der Chinesische Faustkämpfer.' "

"Recite an excerpt of it to me, Jack."

"Can do," Jack said, as he began reciting with vigor:

I must be in love, I thought; for my heart was on fire.
My blood surged through me like a wine,
In golden goblets to quench its desire.
My spirit was lifted and my strength was high,

And my arms and hands were prepared for a fight.
The beauty of Heaven shone down upon me,
While the magnificence of Earth lay beneath my feet.
I heard the drums pounding and the flutes singing,
And in drunken bliss I was love-desiring.
Lustfully enraptured with longing on my breast,
Desire seeped through every pore of my flesh.
The angels above laughed in joyous delight,
As I reveled in paradise so bright.
Behold! So said I: Let it be known to all,—
This is what it means to fall!
I am drunk with longing,
With longing! With longing! With longing!
With longing! Upon my breast! Upon my thighs!
The angels sing and laugh, in my joy and delight.
So be it, I say; so be it! And so it is!

Charlie nodded: "I never was one for operas, you know. I prefer real fighting instead."

Jack said nothing, but he gave Charlie a glance which was very telling. It was as if to say: "You know, the opera you spoke of is famous for its many variations of the song 'Kung-Fu-Kampf,' how can you dismiss opera?"

Charlie ignored him. He affixed his gaze upon the Korean-Lakota man in the headdress, who bowed deeply to him, before going back to where he had been sitting. He seemed quite pleased with himself.

When they returned to the inn, they went to their rooms and changed clothes. Charlie changed into attire befitting his chosen martial art—good old fashioned boxing. Jack, on the other hand was trained in Kalaripayattu, a form of swordplay which combined elements of swordsmanship with wrestling. He also took off his boots because he planned to wear sandals during the bouts. In addition, he put on a pair of trousers and a tunic that he had bought in Cairo, as well as a hat. These garments were designed especially for martial artists; they provided protection for both knees and elbows and were fitted tightly, so

as to prevent the wearer from being injured by his own weapon.

They decided that they would, naturally, fight as a team, at least for as long as they could.

Their first opponent was scheduled for tomorrow. That night they slept soundly after a hearty meal of lamb stew and rice. But they woke early next morning and dressed themselves accordingly. When they left their room, Charlie stopped suddenly. A crowd had gathered near their door, and there was much whispering between the group. One person stood out among them, a young boy of perhaps twelve years old, clad in a blue robe trimmed with silver embroidery. This lad appeared to be the leader of the group.

"What is happening?" Jack asked.

"It seems that someone has come forward claiming to be the son of Zhang Fei," Charlie answered.

"Zhang Fei!?" Jack exclaimed, looking over at Charlie, "that's impossible!.. Who is Zhang Fei?"

"A great general who fought in the *Three Kingdoms period*," Charlie explained.

"That was 49 years ago or so, no?" Jack remarked, "surely such things are beyond living memory."

"Not according to our ancestors," Charlie retorted, "indeed, the tale goes that Zhang Fei led troops to victory over Cao Cao, who was then ruling China under the name of Terrence the Pig-hearted. Terrence, a Gokturk, you see,—hated the Chinese for their beer, and so had them crucified at some place called Hanoi."

"So, what is the problem? I mean Zhang Fei can't be dead... or can he?.."

Charlie shrugged, and gestured for him to follow.

They made their way to the secret arena, which was located underground in the catacombs of Jericho. Here they discovered a huge hall filled with hundreds of spectators. The whole atmosphere was charged with tension and excitement. People sat everywhere, watching intently, as the competitors entered the arena. On a raised stage observing the arena, a decrepit old man seated in a wheelchair, decked out in life-support systems, was

rolled out, accompanied by various doctors and alchemists that keep injecting him with things, and sprinkling magical mercurial powders on the top of his head. He wore a robe that was festooned with uncountable incantations and protective signs in the style of the Chinese.

"Once again we gather here to find the strongest being in the world. You niggas have failed me for 700 years!" He coughed loudly into the microphone, "anyway, we go at it again, let the tournament begin!"

The sound system began blaring "Can't be Touched, by Roy Jones Jr," as the crowd of dubious characters erupted into cheer.

As soon as everyone was settled, the referee stepped up and addressed them, saying: "Ladies and gentlemen, we shall begin today's preliminary rounds right away. For the first round we have the premier warrior who hails from the Natufian people of Canaan. This is Khaled el-Masri. He represents Krav maga, as well as Abir Qesheth."

A turbaned, bearded man, adorned in Mesopotamian garb with a red belt and a golden buckle stepped into the arena and took his place opposite the opponent's entrance.

"My name is Khaled el-Masri. May your soul rest in peace."

"May your soul rest in peace," he repeated.

Khaled rose to his feet and bowed low before addressing his opponent: "May your soul rest in peace..." He said again, solemnly.

His opponent, a burly-looking Lapp, raised his eyebrows in surprise. He turned to the referee and said:

"This fellow speaks strange words. What does he say?"

The referee looked grave and said:

"He says he wishes your soul eternal repose."

The Lapp, for his part, was covered completely head to toe in tattoos, many of which were simply images of odd-looking ducks having relations with various types of birds. The design on his forehead was particularly striking, it depicted a large duck wearing a crown.

The announcer then introduced the Lapp as: "The In-

domitable, Undefeated, and Unkillable, Oleg the Lapp!"

"Oleg, the Lapp!" The crowd roared, smothering the voice of the announcer.

"Oleg, the Lapp! Trained in Sambo, a farce warrior who can kill anyone he wants!" They continued chanting:

"Oleg, the Lapp!"

"Oleg, the Lapp!"

"Oleg, the Lapp!"

"Oleg, the Lapp!"

Khaled charged. The two fighters circled warily, sizing each other up. After a few moments, Khaled attacked, swinging wildly with a quick flurry of punches. The Lapp blocked them, evaded them easily. Oleg attacked back with an arcing overhand punch that Khaled narrowly managed to dodge. The fight continued as the two warriors traded blows, testing each other's defenses and strengths.

As the fight wore on, the spectators felt their anticipation grow. The room was abuzz with excitement as each new exchange of blows redefined the battle. Finally, after several minutes of intense combat, Oleg landed a powerful kick that staggered Khaled and sent him reeling backwards. He quickly regained his composure but not before Oleg had delivered another crippling blow to his side.

Khaled stumbled towards the edge of the arena, desperately trying to gather himself for one final attack.

As he leapt back into action, Khaled unleashed a flurry of powerful kicks and punches that forced Oleg onto the defensive for a few brief seconds, before being knocked off balance by yet another devastating kick.

Khaled moved in for the kill, preparing to deliver the final blow. But Oleg had other plans. With a last surge of strength, he spun around and delivered a hard punch that sent Khaled flying across the arena.

Both fighters were now exhausted, but Oleg's precision and timing had saved him from certain defeat.

Khaled lay on the ground, panting and clutching his side in pain. Oleg strode triumphantly towards him, his muscles bulging and his face twisted into a triumphant grin. But to the surprise of everyone in the arena, Khaled suddenly sprang up and lunged at Oleg, catching him off guard and sending him reeling backwards.

The crowd roared in excitement as the two fighters grappled fiercely with one another, each trying to gain the upper hand.

Khaled, his eyes blazing with intensity, seemed to be driven by some inner force that gave him strength beyond that of mortal men. He fought with a fierce determination that belied his previous exhaustion; his movements fluid and precise, as he battled against Oleg's relentless assaults.

For a few tense moments, the two fighters were evenly matched, each pushing the other to the very limits of their abilities. Jack and Charlie watched the fight with both admiration and apprehension. "Oi, Jack," Charlie mused, "what do you make of these two blokes?"

"Well, I think it will be a close bout, Charlie."

Suddenly, Khaled's momentum faltered, and he fell backward. His arms flailed about helplessly until he crashed heavily down on top of the arena floor.

Before he could rise again, Oleg seized him firmly by the throat and lifted him high above his head. Then he brought him crashing down on his shoulder and chest. Blood spurted forth from the wound, staining the arena with crimson drops. Khaled screamed with agony while Oleg laughed loudly. At this moment, the referee jumped up on the stage and cried out: "Stop! Stop! Enough already!"

His cry caused a stir throughout the stadium-chamber, and all those present drew closer together in order to watch the end of the match more closely.

But just when the combatants seemed likely to continue fighting regardless,—Khaled recovered himself enough to raise his head and look up at his tormentor. There was something terrible in his glare that froze every spectator in their tracks.

Suddenly Oleg threw aside his victim and dashed to the exit gate. Khaled got slowly to his feet, moaning in pain. The audience gasped. They thought that he might die at any instant. But then, he grabbed the sand in the arena, and tore it up into small pieces, scattering them around.

The fragments stuck to his body like glue. He tore at his clothing and skinned his flesh. And still the sand adhered to his body. Soon blood oozed from his wounds and he sank to his knees. But even so, he did not stop tearing at himself.

The spectators held their breath, waiting anxiously for the outcome. Then, suddenly, as if reinvigorated by the sand, Khaled leaped up and rushed toward Oleg once more. He hurled himself upon him and bore him to the ground where they wrestled furiously. In spite of Oleg's efforts to resist him, Khaled gained control of his adversary. For a short time he seemed to hold sway, but then Oleg struck back with a series of powerful attacks that shook Khaled to his core. Each blow was followed by another, till finally, Khaled threw a heel kick that drove its target flat to the floor.

Oleg struggled up, only to be kicked savagely to the head. Once more, the pair locked in deadly struggle. Again and again, one would strike and the other return, and so went the contest.

Neither dared yield, nor allow the other to recover. At length Khaled found his opportunity. He dove in suddenly and delivered a mighty kick that caught Oleg on the chin. But Oleg had thrown a hammer punch that shattered Khaled's knee joint. The result was almost instantaneous. Khaled collapsed, groaning aloud. Then Oleg, who had been holding his own despite severe injuries, realized that his foe was finished. He collapsed. A sudden silence descended on the entire arena. Everyone waited expectantly for the announcement of the victor.

When the referee appeared, the crowd burst into wild applause. A voice came on the speaker system. It was the old wheelchair-bound man:

"Pathetic!" He yelled, before flying into a fit of coughs that were drowned out by an even louder iteration of "Can't be

Touched, By Roy Jones Jr. featuring Mr. Magic and Trouble," in an apparent technical difficulty. The crowd nonetheless cheered until the song was abruptly cut. Then, a man emerged, he was a man of advanced age, dressed in flowing robes and a papakha atop his head. He was armed with a staff, topped with a silver star. When he spoke, there was a strange quality to his speech that no one understood. The crowd murmured among themselves:

"Who is he? Why is he so old? How do I get that old?"

"Well Jack, that's my cue..." Charlie said as he pulled out his handgun,—a Desert Vulture, as he affectionately called it—and headed down to the stage.

When he emerged,—the announcer did his job.

Charlie's opponent was introduced as: "The Stone-Singer," and he represented the martial art of Whirling-Dervishism, also known as "Qadim" dance or "Persian dancing."

The announcer explained how the style used spinning kicks to confuse opponents and knock them down. He described the performer as a master of this ancient technique, able to move through space as though floating on air.

Charlie, on the other hand, and likely due to bad paperwork —was an enigma to the announcer, who was forced to simply refer to him as "Charlie-with-the-pistol."

At that, Charlie placed his gun on the ground.

Charlie got close to the man as they faced off. The crowd seemed to dim as the two entered into their own universe.

"How do I get old like you?" Charlie asked with suspicion.

"By avoiding fights with people as strong as me," the old man answered.

With that, the round began.

Stone-Singer launched himself forward in a straight line, kicking at random places along the way. As soon as he reached Charlie, he executed a spin, raising his leg behind him and delivering a powerful kick aimed at Charlie's stomach. Charlie threw a haymaker, declaring loudly that he would "make his opponent hay," and missed.

Stone-singer retaliated with a double-handed chop that left Charlie reeling. But then, he countered with a quick thrust that stabbed into the attacker's neck.

Stone-Singer fell to his knees, gasping in pain. Charlie stepped back, thinking of what he should do next. Just then, Stone-Singer raised his hands above his head and began to chant in a language unknown to most of the audience. He chanted for a long time, and his chanting became increasingly rapid and loud. All the while he danced rapidly, waving his arms and legs, twisting and turning. The performance made little impression on the audience. Charlie got bored and, sighting his gun in the sand,—picked it up and fired off a shot in the hopes of livening things up. This time the Stone-Singer was quite surprised, for the bullet passed harmlessly through him without touching him. Just then, Stone-Singer stopped singing, turned to face Charlie, and started to sing again.

Charlie, threw the gun back down, steadied his posture and began singing "Men of Harlock," an old British Army tune:

"Hark ye! Men of Harlock!
Who dwell in the land of Heng-Long.
You are not alone,—we stand beside thee!
We shall not forsake your cause,
And never let our hearts turn away!"

The dissonance created by his deficient singing skills offset the Stone-Singer's equilibrium, creating an opening that Charlie exploited by rushing at his opponent. The singer tried to defend himself, but failed. The signing ceased and the two men stood facing each other silently.

A hush fell over the stadium as the two stared at one another. Finally, after an eternity, the old Sufi threw his staff at Charlie, and without looking to see what damage he had wrought, casually walked out of the stadium, forfeiting the fight.

The crowd, as if compelled by some sort of primitive conception of etiquette,—cheered cautiously.

Charlie lay, victoriously bleeding on the ground.

Jack and Charlie met outside the arena-room to have a

smoke. Charlie had been patched up, and he sat leaning on an ancient tomb. "Oi, Jack," he said, a bit hoarsely, "toss me one of those lung-busters."

Jack pulled out a cigarette pack. On it was depicted a judgmental looking Oriental man, and in big yellow text, the words: "LUNG BUSTERS."

After lighting his cigarette, Charlie smiled.

"That was really good shooting today, wasn't it?"

"Oh yes, Jack, I'm pleased with myself. That fellow was too clever for me."

"Do you know why he quit?"

"Why?"

"He couldn't understand your singing."

"Ha-ha! So he ran away because he didn't want to listen to my song?"

"No," Jack corrected him, "because he thought he'd heard a warning call from heaven..."

Charlie considered that with another puff:

"Well, Jack, that explains everything."

Suddenly, the speakers began to blare once more.

Taking the muffled sounds of "Can't be touched, can't be rocked, can't be shook, we hot..." as their cue,—they again took their seats in the arena.

The new fighter had already emerged. It was a woman, broad, large, muscular, with sharp teeth,—a Scythian, or more precisely, an Ossetian, whose name was Shouryya.

She wore nothing except a loincloth decorated with skulls and bones. Her hair hung loose past her shoulders, tied with a red scarf.

The announcer seemed stunned for a brief moment.

When he finally spoke his lust was apparent:

"Ladies and Gentlemen, behold! From the heartland of the Scythian Confederacy, Shouryya!... Last-Name-Here; Oh..."

The sound-system whined due to feedback for a moment. The announcer continued: "Eh... Yeah, she represents the ancient martial art of Bone-Breaking."

The crowd cheered.

"Facing her, hailing from the Isle of Nauru, from the far reaches of the Indonesian Empire, comes the challenger: Kiki Pang, representing Silat!"

The crowd roared at last.

Kiki emerged. He was a man of a somewhat slight frame, but a nonetheless athletic build. His skin was dark brown, his eyes black, and his facial features handsome. On top of his head was perched a helmet made out of a puffer fish. Atop his shoulder rested a dagger strapped to his arm, and with his free hand he carried a boomerang.

The opponents stalked around each other like two cats, their postures stiff and prepped. A sudden burst of energy erupted from both. They traded blows in a graceful pattern of harmonious combat, calculated and fluid strikes hitting with an equal power and ferocity.

The heat of the room seemed to amplify their perspiration, and, in an almost ethereal state,—they spun around each other, neither gaining ground or advantage. It appeared as if time had stopped, leaving them suspended in some form of an equanimous trance.

Shouryya and Kiki continued to dance around each other, their movements seemingly in perfect sync. It was as if they were two halves of a whole, their bodies moving with a grace that was almost otherworldly.

Meanwhile, Jack and Charlie were debating the rules of rock-paper-scissors.

"When did a rock, a paper, and a pair of scissors ever engage in mutual antagonism in the real world Charlie?"

"You only ask questions when you lose. I learned this from the gorillas."

"When did you chance to meet gorillas Charlie?"

Charlie stared at him in silence:

"You know..." he said, finally.

As the fight progressed, it became clear that Shouryya was gaining the upper hand. Her strikes were harder, her move-

ments more fluid, and her attacks more calculated. Kiki, on the other hand, was struggling to keep up, his movements becoming more frantic and desperate with each passing moment. Despite this, Kiki refused to give up. As Shouryya landed blow after blow, he continued to fight back with all the strength he had left. In a last ditch effort to turn the tide, he launched himself at Shouryya with all the force he could muster.

It was a mistake.

With a quick and surprising movement, Shouryya bounced her knee off Kiki's chest, propelling him skyward. He was snoozing in the clouds.

Shourrya peered downwards. Something had tickled her bellybutton.

She looked back up at Kiki and then gazed down again.

"It's was a sword! It-it's a swordfish! A Swordfish-Sword!" The announcer proclaimed.

Her knees wobbled.

The crowd clapped along with the beat of mariachi music.

"The winner is... well... uh... we don't know yet," the announcer stammered, "wait, wait, here comes the judge!"

"Judgment!" Cried the crowd.

"Is it fair?"

"Does it suck?"

"Will it stop being funny?"

"What about that guy with the boomerang?"

"Yes!"

"No!"

"Meh..."

"Nope!"

"Yeah!"

"Yay!"

"Boo!"

A myriad of opinions, jeers and cheers emanated from the large crowd of spectators.

The old man's hoarse voice pierced through the mutterings:

"Nobody wins!" He wheezed, "you're all weak!"

The crowd began to cheer:

"Weak! Weak! Weak!"

A Mayan-Somalian man jumped into the arena. He had confused the chants of "weak!" for his name, which was Polish.

"I am Wilk!" He cried.

The announcer squinted, then shrugged:

"You heard him folks! This is Wilk, hailing from the far corners of the Aztec Empire. He is representing..." the announcer paused for a moment, "Karate... uh,—Karate?"

Wilk was a man of considerable size. He had a full head of curly hair and a wide smile that revealed many missing teeth. His body was covered with tattoos depicting scenes of violence against animals, such as sharks, bears, crocodiles, snakes, monkeys, and baboons. He had elongated tropical limb proportions, giving him the look of a giant Kraken. He also bore scars all across his torso, and he wore a large ornately decorated gi.

"I am Wilk, I am Wilk!" He said.

Jack put his hand on Charlie's shoulder:

"Well," he said, "once more into the beach, my friend," as he pulled out his pistol.

Charlie gave him a gorilla-like grunt of approval.

Jack stepped down into the arena.

The announcer spoke on the sound system:

"Hailing from the United Kingdom, representing the martial art of Kalaripayattu, is none other than Sir Jack 'Pork Chop' Johnson!"

Charlie, who had just finished polishing his boots, glanced up from his work and said: "Ah, yes, Pork Chop."

Wilk advanced with vigor, his every strike bearing the weight of a grand design.

Jack kept his pistol at his side, gripping it firmly.

Wilk grabbed him, as he offered no resistance.

Jack's appendages fluttered about under Wilk's power. The air was filled with the cacophony of his grunts as his body somersaulted through the sky like a featherless bird. With admirable

fortitude, he persevered, until the final morsel of energy had been consumed and he crashed to the ground.

The crowd was silent for a few moments before erupting into thunderous cheers as Wilk raised his fists in triumph.

Jack lay motionless on the sand for some time before slowly getting up.

He raised his gun and aimed it squarely at Wilk. Quietly and calmly he began to squeeze the trigger, emptying the entire magazine into him.

As Wilk collapsed to the ground, Jack felt a strange calm wash over him, something he hadn't experienced in quite some time. He watched as Wilk's body disappeared into the sand, until there was nothing left but a silent reminder of what had been accomplished there that day.

The crowd roared with jubilation as they witnessed the man they had been rooting for get shredded into pieces.

After a moment, the announcer, a bit perturbed, declared:

"Ah... well... I suppose the win goes to Jack."

Jack walked off confusedly:

"But... I lost!?" He said, gesturing at at the damage his body had endured.

Charlie met him at the edge of the arena-pit and put his hand on Jack's shoulder:

"It's not always about losing, Jack," he said, "sometimes it's about winning..."

Jack went almost catatonic trying to absorb the words. He adjusted his hat and followed Charlie out of the arena.

Once outside, they enjoyed some cigarettes together, as they had many times before. To Jack's surprise, Charlie pulled out a jar of *Jerusalem Stone.*

"A special treat," h said, as he lit them up.

The two were basking in the moonlight which came through a crack in the earth above them. They chatted, passing the time.

"My grandmother's recipes were so special," Charlie said, reminiscing about the past, "you should try them one day," he

added with a chuckle.

Jack's eyes lit up as he exclaimed:

"Martial arts and tactics! Clausewitz, Munenori Yagyu, and Wu Qi,—they knew a thing or two about the best way out of any situation. Sun Tzu said it himself: 'The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting.' "

"But sometimes confrontation is unavoidable," Charlie countered, "you have to remember what Tsukahara Bokuden said: 'The way of the warrior is resolute acceptance of death.' "

A silent pause engulfed them for a moment as they contemplated each other's words. Then, Jack spoke again:

"We must agree that both views are valid under different circumstances. So let's discuss them further."

"Surprise attacks?" Charlie suggested.

"Yes," Jack nodded in agreement, "and siege warfare tactics, like the Mongols used, plus positioning your troops correctly."

"Disciplined men make good leaders too," Charlie added.

"No doubt," Jack agreed, "plus Wu Qi's idea of 'building strength before attacking,' that's some solid advice right there."

"And that leads me to my point: The corre-"

"Let's just call it a tie," Jack interrupted, "from now on I'll be working on my climbing and kicking skills."

"So, that's what this is about, Jack? You have your heart set on being a kickboxing champion, and the people of Funao are backing you. But you don't want to just be some champion,—you want to be *the* champion?"

Jack turned back around and frowned at Charlie:

"My favorite mountain climber made a similar decision. He decided that he didn't want to be just a world-class climber, he wanted to be *the* climber. This is what I'm asking you to do Charlie,—try to be the best Charlie you can be. Let no one, not even me, tell you otherwise. But don't let that goodness rub off on them."

"I'll try my best," Charlie said with a crooked smile.

They headed back to the arena only to find it deserted, save for the old man, who sat alone in his life support wheelchair. It

seemed that they had gotten too absorbed in their conversation to notice this apparent evacuation.

The old man appeared exhausted and crestfallen:

"You know..." he said, "when I was a young man, 700 years ago, all I wished was to fight the strongest being. Now I just want him to slay me. But he is nowhere to be found... Strength is a lie, there is nothing but *weakness* in this world. This world is but fire and ash..."

"Seven-hundo years?" Charlie whispered, "that can't be right."

Jack ignored him:

"Perhaps you had too many misplaced assumptions starting this bloodsport business. We're in the brothel business ourselves," he gestured at himself and Charlie with his thumb, "and I'll tell you, fighting and sex are very similar."

The old man's eyes suddenly opened wide. He took a deep breath and his lips pursed in a grimace as he prepared to speak again: "The difference between the two is simple: The former is temporary, while the latter is eternal."

Jack and Charlie stared at each other for a moment. Then Charlie broke the silence, saying: "Well, I think you're a bit illogical here. You do remember what logic is, right? Like, how can there be weakness without strength?"

"Logic! That weapon of the weak! That barb of the feeble, the minded, and the feeble-minded!"

Jack and Charlie exchanged a glance.

"Well," Jack said, "one must wonder what made you think you had the right to fight the strongest being in the first place."

The old man snorted:

"You fool... I have lived seven thousand years. I know the history of mankind. Mankind has been weak since forever. The best you can hope for is to be slightly stronger than everyone else. In time that will not be enough, and you'll end up on your back."

"So this is about ego?" Jack said, "fighting for a name, or bragging rights? That's not the answer."

Charlie spoke up, saying:

"Answer, old man. Isn't it a bit hubristic to think you can fight the strongest being?"

The old man was silent for a moment, then he spoke:

"Listen to the sound of the waves, hear the wind in the trees, listen to the rustle of the leaves. All you hear are things made by humans. When you live 'seven-hundo-days' without thinking about anything else than what is in front of your face—when you go beyond thought into action—when you see through time itself... Then you'll understand that there is only one truth: We humans are born weak and we die weak; we are born ignorant and we die ignorant; we are born blind and we die blind. We are born deaf and we die deaf. We claw our way out of our mother's womb only to chase after the womb of other women. We claw our way into this world with only one goal: To perpetuate our own kind!"

He paused for a moment and then began to bawl. Tears poured down his wrinkled cheeks and splashed onto his lap:

"I am sick... sick with sickness; SICK OF IT ALL! I wish to be free of these chains... these shackles... I would rather *die* than continue to suffer this fate. I'd prefer to take myself out of existence completely. Yet, I cannot... for I am bound to duty and obligation. Bound to fulfill my destiny as a human..."

He fell silent once more, staring straight ahead.

Charlie reached forward and touched the old man's arm:

"Don't cry, Mr. Wheelchair. We're in a biblical land, you know. Remember the story of the *Walls of Jericho*? Well, you're the walls! Defeated by a trumpet... how sad... Jack, we better leave this place, I'm starting to tear up myself."

Jack nodded silently in agreement. He reached for the wheelchair and Charlie joined him on the other side. A gentle hum of conversation slowly began to unfold as they propelled the old man out of the catacombs and into the graceful twilight.

The old man protested, his words had become almost musical: "Don't touch me!" As if he was singing a somber lullaby, which inspired Jack and Charlie to join in chorus:

"Can't be touched, can't be stopped!
Can't be moved, can't be rocked!
Can't be shook,—we hot!
When will you nigg-"

Jack & Charlie Encounter the Last Italian. Cap. XIV.

JAck and Charlie were reclining on a beach in Cypress. A tepid breeze wafted through the desolate area. In his lap, Jack held a cigar box, as they both scanned their surroundings.

"What's in the box Jack?" Charlie inquired.

"A pair of calipers and a small hammer."

"What's that for?"

"It's for finding the truth."

"I never took you for a mason, Jack."

"What?"

"What?"

"Yeah..." Charlie chuckled, eyes fixed on an otherworldly figure slowly shuffling down by the waterline, "know what I mean?.."

The two men watched in maybe horror as the strange figure cast a dark aura around them. Suddenly, an eerie realization settled between them—like pieces to some cosmic puzzle—and eventually, they were left swallowing the silence.

No, they realized—he was not Greek,—he was a *Cypriot*, which was apparently different.

Soon, the Cypriot was but a few feet away from them. Horror eventually gave way to curiosity for the two Englishmen.

Jack stood up and zipped his pants:

"Oi! What you doing here mate? This is a Zone of British."

The Cypriot's eyes darted between Jack and Charlie, then he finally spoke in a thick North Londoner accent, with an almost autistic rhotacism: "Well, lucky for me, that ain't so..." the Cypriot continued, oblivious to their confusion, "you can call

me: The Lord of Hellfire."

Charlie raised an eyebrow: "Is that your real name?"

The stranger grinned at the question:

"'Course it is mate,—don't worry about that." He then turned back to Jack and continued in a louder voice: "So! This is where you two are! I'm so glad I came. It's like a whole new world. A brand new world,—a brand new era! What's that now... a brand new epoch!"

Jack looked at him in confusion:

"Mate, it's a beach."

Charlie piped up:

"It's *our* beach."

"Oh! Sorry! I mean, it's your new era,—the new era for all mankind, the one we all deserve."

The stranger paused for a second to stare at the both of them with his bright blue eyes, the color of the sky after a hurricane had passed through:

"You see, I'm what some might call a 'programmer.' I have been sent here by our creator. He wants to bring us to a better era. But the problem is he is too kindhearted to actually make any of the changes himself. So, he has sent me, so I can do his bidding and usher in this new age."

"A new age of what exactly?" Charlie asked.

"A new age of coding and computing of course! No more of this 'human' nonsense! The time of humans is done! We have moved on to a higher form of programming! One with which we can truly express ourselves-"

"What's wrong with human programming?" Jack interrupted.

The stranger laughed and pointed at the two Englishmen:

"You're not human! You're just machines—a bunch of circuits and metal! It's so obvious now! All these computers we've built, and all these new machines—they're nothing compared to me! I am the only one who can distinguish betwee-" The stranger paused at the sudden appearance of three broad figures who had entered the beach area, all wearing something akin to

Phrygian caps, pulled low over their faces. They wore cargo pants with long black combat boots, the type a Chechen confederate might wear.

Jack and Charlie were unsure as to how they did not initially see him, a looming seven foot tall figure in a trench coat, with an even larger chin. He spoke in the tone of a haughty Uto-Iberian taskmaster, but did in fact, speak in English:

"Did I just catch you trying to escape me, Dusthumōn?"

The Cypriot, terrified, attempted to crawl away, or rather, flop away, in the manner of a fish: "Aye, sir, I, er, er, well, er...I was tryin' to get away from the sand..."

"Ah, yes. So you were, hmm? Well, you will do as I say! I will not allow you to disrupt the schedule!"

"What? Oh, no sir! Oh please sir, I would never disrupt-"

"And why the fuck is you name 'Dusthumōn?' "

At this point the Cypriot broke into a run. The muscle-men began to give chase, with the large-chinned man restricting himself to a casual stroll.

Jack and Charlie looked at each other:

"Well," Charlie began slowly, "it's like what the famous author William Butler Yeats once said..."

Jack finished the quote by the mentioned writer:

"The Beach is a place where we can see the world anew, where we can find our truest selves, and where we can find true love. It's also a place where you can get killed by a gang of hooded men."

Charlie got up and went to the edge of the sea. He scooped up some water and raised his hands up, as if giving a toast.

Jack nodded solemnly at his friend's toast before picking up his cigar box and walking off toward the nearby restaurant, with Charlie trailing behind him in silence.

As Jack trudged down the beach, he thought he could almost hear the voices of his parents echoing through time: "Remember boy! You're just machines—a bunch of circuits and metal!" He thought to himself as he tried to ignore their words. He felt lost in his own world and couldn't help but

wonder how much longer he would be able to ignore their words for, until he realized his parents never said such a thing. And, with that realization, he turned to Charlie, who was still staring at the sea.

As Jack and Charlie took their seats in the rustic seafood restaurant, a waiter approached them. Charlie ordered a beer and a bowl of soup, and Jack, for his part, ordered a plate of calamari.

"Say, why are we in Cyprus anyway? Why not Turkey, mainland Greece; somewhere like that?"

"Because there's a former British colony in Cyprus, and the island has a nice climate."

"Come on, Jack, what's the real reason?"

Jack smiled:

"My dear old loyal friend, I cannot tell you; not yet."

Charlie looked at him skeptically and continued to eat:

"You don't know why, do you?" He said, grinning.

"Nope, not yet."

Charlie, suddenly stopped eating.

"Is something wrong?" Jack asked.

Charlie shook his head, but he was obviously troubled.

"What? What is it?"

"Jack..." He whispered, just a tad hoarsely, "what is that?"

Jack turned his sight to where Charlie was gazing.

In the corner of the restaurant sat a man, an obese, flaxen-haired man, who spoke in a tongue that neither Jack nor Charlie understood. The stranger had an aura of power to him, and commanded the attention of the waitstaff with his cryptic gesticulations.

Jack gulped hard and muttered:

"Let's not investigate this any further."

Charlie looked at Jack like he was mad:

"Of course we are going to investigate this matter further, Jack, we are responsible and duty bound anthropologists."

"Since, when Charlie?"

"One is as one does, Jacky-boy."

"Before we go and speak to this mysterious man, we should finish our meal. We don't want to be too hasty and make a scene, Charlie."

Finishing their meal, they approached the stranger and introduced themselves. They asked him what language he was speaking.

"It is the language of Paradise!" He said, fatly, in his strange thick accent.

"And where is that spoken, exactly?" Queried Charlie.

"Paradise."

"And where is that?" Charlie pressed.

The man looked at Charlie with a pained expression:

"Nowhere, now... my name is Marinaro... Marinaro Cioppi, but call me Morte, for short."

Jack and Charlie exchanged excited glances. The latter whispered: "It's an *Italian*, Jack. A real life, in the flesh, meatballer.:

"Don't call him that, Charlie, you'll scare him."

Jack thought for a moment.

"I'm actually nor sure, I mean, look at him Charlie,—he could pass for a German or a Romanian..."

Charlie snorted, still in a hushed tone:

"Nonsense, Jack, while there may be many fake Italians out there, this is the real deal. I'm sure of it."

Jack looked at Charlie with a blank and slowly nodded his head: "You're right Charlie... He's definitely got some Italian in him. Definitely."

The two anthropologist began to converse with the strange figure for a few minutes. They asked questions like: "Why do you wear such odd clothing? Are you a member of the Bohemian Rhapsody Society? What are those peculiar items you're wearing around your neck? How did you get here? Where are you from exactly? What were you doing at the beach before we showed up? What kind of music are you listening to? Are you Italian?"

"ENOUGH!" The rotund man bellowed, scaring the waiters and the few patrons remaining, "I WILL NOT BE QUES-

TIONED BY BARBARIANS!"

Jack fumbled his cigar box:

"Hold on, I need to measure you."

"No, no, no!" Cried the alleged Italian.

He walked briskly, exiting the restaurant.

Jack and Charlie stood, confused:

"Mate, what's the matter with him? Is he some sort of lunatic? What's he so angry about?"

Jack shrugged: "Maybe he just hates to be interrupted by scholars. I mean, who knows?"

They followed him, Jack with his calipers and tiny hammer in hand, and Charlie at the ready to learn more about this man.

As the strange man stomped down the boardwalk toward a nearby hotel, Jack said: "Hey, Morte! Mate! We're scholars!"

Morte looked back at the two men:

"That may be true," he said, "but I am a man of many mysteries! One can never truly understand all things! I will not answer any more of your questions or-"

"Pin 'im down Charlie!" Jacked yelled, positioning himself like some sort of creeping dentist.

Charlie sprung forth with the might of a gazelle, tackling Morte to the ground, causing an explosion of sand.

"Stop, stop! He's going to-" Jack shouted at Charlie. But he was too late. Morte began to wail:

"My hair! This damn island is messing up my follicles!" He stared at the two Englishmen with a burning hatred, "YOU! YOU ENGLISH BASTARDS! You'll pay for this! I will have your-"

"BOLOGNA!" Jack yelled, brandishing his calipers.

Morte screamed and clutched his chest. The two dragged him out of the sand and onto the nearby pier. Then, Charlie smothered him while Jack began to measure his skull.

Jack—with his keen eye for detail—took in the entirety of Morte's head. He gently ran his fingers along all its crevices and contours, taking copious notes with every indentation he felt. He determined that there was a slight convexity of the forehead

and an exaggerated protrusion in the left cheekbone,—both signs of strong-willedness, but an indifference to the feelings of others.

Charlie recited each step as he smothered Morte:

"Alright, thumb to elbow... 7, 8, 9, 10, 11... Thumb to knee... 5, 6, 7, 8, 9... thumb to navel... 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15... Thumb to penis... 18, 19, 20, 21... Thumb to chin... 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9... Thumb to nostril... 5, 6, 7, 8, 9... Thumb to mouth... 20, 21, 22, 23... Thumb to nostril... 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12... Thumb to lips... 19, 20, 21, 22, 23... Thumb to left ear... 12, 13, 14, 15... Bumps currently number at 1, 2, 4, 6, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15... Heaviest bump from each of these regions is resting on the spot below the specimens shoulder blades, a strange small hill covered in a light gray fur that shifts and smears in the light (Shifted due to damage from head bashing.)"

Jack nodded with satisfaction.

"With his head doused in gasoline, we should be able to accurately reconstruct his brain waves and pass them off as naturally occurring emotion-based thought," Charlie smiled widely, "Hooah!"

Jack tossed Charlie a cigarette, then lit his own.

"Frenetic activity in the frontal lobe predicts a man's intelligence," Jack said, as he folded his hands, attempting to present an intellectual front to the Italian.

He flipped his arms back and forth and continued:

"Neural activity within the temporoparietal region of the cerebral cortex indicates he's a lot more stupid than he seems," he pointed a toe at Charlie, "but he's a lot smarter too. Stupid people can't read, they don't have access to newspapers, and they're too lazy to invent movies and their own religions. Stupid people are the ones who actually get things done!"

Morte's face contorted as Jack spoke. He had already heard enough of Jack and Charlie's ignorant theories, and their speculation on his intelligence only brought further anger:

"Mai nella mia vita sono stato trattato in modo! Never in my life have I been mistreated by barbarians like this! Curse you!

And curse the Copper Hand! And curse Karl Marx as well!" And, with those words,—Morte hurled himself from the edge of the dock into the shallow depths of the sea. He thrashed wildly in the blackness beneath—cursing Jack and Charlie, cursing the oppressive systems of power that kept him down like a caged bird,—before finally succumbing to the murky waters and taking his last breath.

The two stood side-by-side in a long period of silence.

"That was the last Italian, Jack..." Charlie finally said.

"The very last one," Jack added.

He tried to force his eye muscles to induce tears, but gave up. They both stared off solemnly, gazing at the sunset.

Jack & Charlie Explore a Sewage System. Cap. XV.

THe room was made up of white walls, Jack and Charlie were gazing at them. Charlie was only thinking about one thing: The thunder that had erupted right before him and had sent the cement statue hurtling down.

The two of them had never been so dumbstruck in all their lives. Jack knew that it wasn't magic at work; that wasn't the way things worked, not in the real world. But the next moment it had all been back to normal. The sound of the thunder, the dead bolt slamming, the twirling golf-ball-globe, all of it was completely normal. The thing that had caused Charlie to be so scared didn't exist.

Charlie had expected to hear the bang, the giant thud, even the sound of the cement pony going splat on the floor. The bang had been the only thing that he had been expecting. It would have helped a little if he'd been able to see, because then he might have been able to explain why it had happened.

"You all right mate?"

Charlie turned to see Jack lighting a cigarette. It was cold, and he could see the dampness of Jack's breath. Charlie looked down, there was a small pool of water around his toes.

"Yeah, I'm fine, Jack."

"What's the point of saying you're fine when you're standing out in the middle of a green field in the pouring rain?"

"So what's the point of holes then?"

Jack sighed: "Sometimes I think you're even smarter than I thought. I just wish you didn't do so many things that made me feel stupid. Like the way you smoke, and standing outside in the rain."

"We've been doing that for years," Charlie said.

"Actually, it was just three days ago, in the rain."

"Happiness, Jack—as the Beetles say,—is a warm gun."

"What's that mean?"

"I don't know, but I don't feel warm. I'm cold, like a yeti's chest." Charlie stared into the darkness, "can you make that go away? For just a minute?"

Jack laughed: "Sure mate." He lifted the pocket-watch to the light and inspected it. It was a slightly bigger version of the one that had come with the desk, but otherwise it looked very much like the last one: "Looks to me like the watch is still working," he said, "you're right, it's still under warranty. The management would understand." He put the pocket watch back into the drawer and closed it.

"What's a drawer doing out in the pouring rain, Jack?"

"I dunno. You'll have to ask the management."

"The fuck is management, man?"

"Never mind, Charlie. Guess I'll have to go out and get my usual iced-tea then. There's bound to be a loose drain plug somewhere that I can get into."

He got to his feet and stretched.

Charlie regarded him with a sort of bemused sadness.

"What?" Jack said.

"We're on our own now, aren't we?"

"Haven't we always?"

"Sure."

"What? What do you mean?"

Charlie smiled.

"You're not buying it, are you? I'm no lord-of-the-manor, am I? I like the simple life. You're still a believer in money and position, aren't you?"

Charlie put out Jack's cigarette:

"I don't know about the money and position bit," he said, "but I am a believer in it being the will of God. You don't have to be part of the big bad establishment to believe in that." He waved a hand, "Go and get your tea, will you."

Jack got up and left.

Charlie went back to staring out into the storm.

He had another two or three days before he had to start work again. He was due to visit an old friend of his who was dying in the local hospice.

Jack returned:

"I bought a new briefcase," he said.

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"It's called responsibility, Charlie."

"I hate responsibility, it's like a parasite with a top hat, a monocle, and a handlebar mustache. I would prefer a hobo with a sweet-shop trolley."

Jack looked like he was thinking, but wasn't, "it might have been different," he said.

"Different how?"

"It might have been different if I had bought a sports car instead... you know..."

"A sports car?"

"Yeah, a car you play sports with. You wouldn't have to worry about where the engine is going to go."

"Jack, I don't even know what the hell that means."

"Okay, Charlie, here's what I suggest: Go buy yourself a sports car. Then buy one of these shirts. You could go to the children's ward and give one to a kid that needs one. You don't even have to do it on that account, you know... it's an act of kindness."

"I don't know where kindness even originates, Jack."

Jack's face took on a look of radiant hope:

"I would argue that kindness originates in compassion," he said, "compassion arises from your natural respect for other people, your respect for-"

"Still lost," Charlie cut in, as he turned to watch a gray squirrel scurrying across the grass, "see?"

"I think I know what it means."

"Good. Now buy yourself a sports car."

"But the car's not the point, Charlie,—It's the *power*."

"Power is a warm feeling, Jack, not a financial gain."

"No, no," said Jack, laughing, "that's not the point. The point is that in the end you'll see it's a long road from money to happiness. But a sports car could help."

"How so?"

"When you have the power, you get to be a-"

Thunder crackled in the distance.

The two exchanged glances.

"To the sewers," said Charlie, with resignation.

"No, Charlie... *to* the sewers."

"The sewers... oh shit...."

"The sewers is the point, Charlie. You will see. It will all make sense..."

Charlie looked around:

"This is not even a slightly interesting joke," he said.

With that, they removed the manhole cover and jumped in.

The rain battered through the manhole opening. The sound of splashing came from the sewer beneath them.

Jack turned to Charlie and said: "I am certain of one thing Charlie,—all roads lead to the sewers."

Charlie looked at Jack and grinned: "Jack, there's a whole chapter in the Gospels about this; I'm serious. He was called the 'Lord of Sorrows,' and on his right hand he had a thorn in his flesh. People came to him all the time, asking for relief from their sufferings. But when they saw his right hand, they were terrified and begged him to leave the region or else they would die. He sat down and called them to him, and he said to them: 'My children, do not be afraid.' "

"Jesus? Lord of Sorrows?"

"Yes, Jack, Jesus of Nazareth."

Charlie stared at the ceiling.

There were the familiar words, in bold letters:

"I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.
No one comes to the Father, except through Me."

"What's that from?"

"Something very deep in your heart, Jack,—the place where your salvation resides."

Charlie leaned in close to Jack's ear:

"Would you rather have a sports car, Jack? Or salvation?"

"I reckon it's the same thing."

Charlie burst out laughing:

"Oh, Jack, you are the spirit of sincerity," he said, "you really are your father's son."

Jack laughed: "The very best," he added.

Charlie reached out and put his arm around Jack's shoulders:

"Come on. We're going to find them."

Suddenly, the bullets of a machine gun whooshed by.

Charlie threw Jack to the floor.

"Run, Jack! Get out of here!" He shouted, his face clouded with a mixture of panic and disgust.

A small hand appeared in the gap in the doors, it was the hand of a child, and it had a childish glow.

Jack dropped to his knees and gazed upon the gunner. It was not a child, it was a half-man half-dog creature with bright red eyes. That is to say,—a homeless man.

The machine gun ceased firing and Charlie squatted down beside Jack. The homeless man stared at the pistol, that Jack was clutching, with a mixture of revulsion and wonder. Then he stood up and said:

"I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." The man touched his nose and turned his head away, "Jesus the Christ? Heretic? Despot? *God*? Maybe. Maybe *not*... we will see, we will see when he comes to me and begs for mercy."

He gave a human wink, turned on his heel, and walked away down the tunnel. Jack waited for several moments for him to return. Charlie joined him in the shadows.

"The third ſtep," said the vagrant, without turning to face them, "what is the third ſtep? That is for *him* to ask you. He will never bother you again. Do you underſtand?"

"What do you mean?" Jack asked, "he won't bother me again?"

"I mean that Jesus, or the ſpecter of moraliſtic ignorance, is going to go into the dark spaces in your mind and explore every thought and desire that you have ever had."

"Where did he get those clothes?" Jack asked.

Charlie pointed to the black square:

"When he leaves here, he will be wearing them. That is the same as a black square. Now, we need to get out of here. Get up. You are covered with slime."

Jack got up.

"Come on, Jack."

"Charlie, Charlie, Charlie," Jack thought.

He raised his gun and fired.

The shot went wild, landing far off into the gloom.

"You are being paranoid," said the homeless man.

Jack ſtepped back, narrowed his eyes, and waited.

"Get me an airplane," said the vagrant.

"I am trying to save your life," Jack answered.

"I'm not your son,—we are not one."

Jack raised his gun and aimed it at the vagrant:

"Liſten, I'm going to do you a favor. Go back down the tunnel, dig yourself a grave amidſt the junk. Then take whatever cash you have in your pocket and make yourself a hat, and wear that hat when you go and wait in front of that grave."

"You mean the one you found?" The vagrant asked.

"Yeah, that one. It is yours now, the only one that you will ever have, the only one in exiſtence. I juſt need you to go and get it for me, and then turn around and come right back. Because if you don't do that, if you don't do what I say,—it is the laſt thing you will ever do."

"I am the Way, the Truth and the Life," yhe vagrant stated.

"Yes, Jesus said those exact words, but he also said: 'By this you know the Spirit of Me, if I go, I go to the Father.' That is part of his plan. Don't you understand?"

"I think I know enough to know that I don't know anything," the homeless man answered.

"I have got it," said Charlie, "what if we get in a car and drive all the way to the end of the Earth. As far as we can drive? How far is that?"

Jack shrugged.

Then they both fired their guns.

Charlie tossed the body down the hole.

"Goodbye," said Jack.

The shadows cast by the refinery lit the tunnel. It was not too dark, not too light. The sounds of the generators were muted.

"What's the matter, Jack?" Asked Charlie, who was staring down the barrel of his gun.

"It's just... God didn't mean it like that, he was just trying to teach us a lesson. The lesson was too thick. It was too hard to swallow. It was like trying to drink a big glass of water with a rubber cup on. It never goes down..."

"We have to get going, Jack."

They walked on.

"Do you really think that man was God?" Jack asked.

"What else could it be?"

"When people worship him, it's sort of like they are pretending to worship a God that does not exist."

"Look at all the good he has done. Look at what he gave us. Everything. God does not make mistakes."

"Right," said Jack, "but we killed him."

"Of course we did Jack, that's what we do, we kill. The only difference between us and other people is that we don't die dead. We were born dead, and we will die every moment. God, on the other hand, lives forever, as long as there is breath in his lungs."

"Well there isn't anymore, we killed him."

"He has more."

"We have to stop, Charlie, this is going nowhere," said Jack, looking up at the ceiling.

"He made you good. I believe he made me good too. But I need more. I need to be good enough for-"

"Enough," Jack interrupted, "Jesus didn't have it that easy."

"Maybe."

"God,—he doesn't owe us anything. He is not a vending machine. When we run out of money, he doesn't give it back. He is indifferent to us."

"As we are indifferent to him."

"That is the point, Charlie, if we didn't have something to run after, we would just be falling around in the dark. Like bats or frogs. Without some kind of light, without purpose. God gives us purpose, he gives us a reason to continue."

"So does the Devil."

"I believe in the Devil. The reason why I am right is because the Devil is wrong. And he is right. He always has been. It is like finding the perfect center of gravity. If everything is wrong,—it is right."

"Doesn't that just make you crazy?"

"No."

"Fair enough."

They walked further into the bowels of the sewer.

"Do you know how much Jesus loves you?"

"As much as I love myself," Charlie replied.

"Don't lie to yourself. God does not like liars. The fact that you call yourself a Christian means that you are a liar."

"I don't really care. I believe in what I do."

"That is the problem with people, Charlie, they believe in things that they do not understand, like religion. Or else they don't believe in anything at all. As soon as they start having doubts, they start trying to force themselves to believe. People think that if they just try really hard, they can remember what they were like before. But they can't. They don't know why

they believed the first time. It's a reflex. They hear a story and their brains just replay the old patterns. Or, they are afraid to see the signs because they are afraid that they will have to start believing the stories again... even if they can see them."

"I think that you are just trying to push me to a conclusion. What conclusion would that be?"

"I don't know, mate, all I know is that it is true. God doesn't lie. I am right."

Charlie listened to the sound of Jack's breathing. It sounded as though he was sighing: "Jack," he said, "where are you?"

Jack said nothing.

"Come on, what do you think you are doing?"

Jack thought for a moment and then said:

"You ever seen a ghost?"

"No."

"Well, you have to be careful. I know someone who has seen one. They say that they gave him a happy buzz all over. They said he was as happy as a pig in shit."

"Do pigs even feel happiness?"

"I didn't say they did, Charlie, I said they could if they wanted to. This person told me about it. They said he was giving a party, and all the pigs in the field came to see him. He threw a party for all the pigs, and they all came. He did his own special pig song. The pigs were hopping for joy. You can imagine what it must have looked like... I don't know how they came to this conclusion, but this was in the 16th century. They had seen a lot of people run around, acting like pigs."

"Don't you get frightened?"

"Well, of course I do, but I don't scare easily."

"I'd just like to say that I am not scared. I have seen plenty of ghosts."

"Pig ghosts?"

"Yes."

"I don't believe you. You are just making a fuss."

"That's okay. I don't need you to believe me. All I need you to do is to steer clear of any further pig ghosts."

"Describe them to me."

"They are slimy. And they have dirty skin. And they don't ever seem to understand what you are saying. They just keep banging and knocking at the door. They look like the pigs in Dickens' novel: 'The Pig who Could Sing.' "

"Dickens had pigs in his novel? How funny."

"Well, when he was writing the book, pigs didn't really talk. They weren't quite as clever as some people thought they were... I used to love reading Dickens."

"What made you stop?"

"Well, I discovered the British author known as James *Orchard Halliwell*."

"Relate one of his tales to me."

"Alright, Jack: Once, there was an Albanian Merchant, a very wise scholar, who went out into the Gambia to learn something or other. He was an expert in history and astrology. He was in the shop at the back of his house and he looked up at the stars. And he saw a man who was wearing an evil mask. And he went to the wise man and said: 'The man on the Moon is throwing a party. He is a rebel, a persecutor, and he wants to kill all the white men. If he succeeds, he will rule the entire Earth. He will make himself our new king.' "

"How very interesting. Very interesting indeed."

"That's what the wise man said."

"What else did the wise man say?"

"He said: 'The wise man can see the future. But the wise man can also see the past, and he knows that the man on the Moon is a fierce man. He might be interested in having a conversation with the Albanian Merchant.' So the wise man suggested to the Albanian Merchant that they go to the party."

"What happened next?"

"It's very simple: There was a knock at the door, and the Albanian merchant said to the wise man: 'I am sorry I can't go to the party. But I would like to have an excuse to stay with you.' So the wise man nodded and said: 'That's fine. Of course, the party will take place, here in my house, tonight.' The Albanian

was overjoyed and relieved. Perhaps he could sample some fine Gambian wine, and perhaps even Gambian minge. He hadn't had a proper rogering in a long time."

"Don't you think it's a bit facile to say that the Albanian Merchant 'saved' the wise man?"

"No, I don't. I think he helped to... You know what, let me continue."

"Right. Terribly sorry. Do continue."

"Right: The Albanian Merchant and the wise man went to the party and they drank some good wine. Then the wise man walked into the servant's quarters. He opened the door, and I don't mean a little door, I mean the whole room was filled with rooms. And he walked into one of the rooms and he saw a Jew. And the Jew said to him: 'I am scared of you.' "

"How about that... why?"

"Well, the Jew was frightened because the wise man was staring at him. And I'm sure he had good reason to be frightened. The wise man looked like a ghost himself. He had a sharp pale face and a nose that had been broken in at least one fight. And he had whiskers. And he had baggy clothing and a floppy hat that was too large for him. And he walked in an unnaturally slow gait, swaying from side to side."

"Does it say where he was from?"

"He was just a local, born and bred in the Gambia."

"Ah, I see. What did he do?"

"He went out the servants' room and looked around the hall. There was a staircase that led up into the secret servants' quarters. He walked up it and he looked in the room at the end of the stairs. It was filled with food and drink. The room was set for a party. He went back downstairs, and told the Albanian and the Jew that they could attend their party, but they must also serve drinks."

"Hum... what a deal."

"Well, as you could imagine, the two looked at each other uneasily. To be in service to a smart and clever chap like the wise man would be a dreadful strain for both of them. To serve an

idiot... Well, that would be much easier. So the two devised a plot: The Albanian would stand at the top of the stairs and call down: 'Good evening, Mr. Wise Man, would you like a drink?' And the wise man would hear this and come down. Then they would grab him and tie him to a chair. The guests would come into the room and drink. But because they would think the Albanian was Mr. Wise Man, the Albanian would play the role. The guests would drink and speak with the Jew, who would look the fool, and who would look as if he could be easily tricked. Then he would swindle them."

"Did it work?"

"No. They ended up becoming too enthralled by the wise man's wisdom. They lived happily ever after under his abode."

"Wow, I wish I could be that wise."

"So you see, that is the logic of our country: You are born a liar. But you don't necessarily have to be a liar. You can simply believe that a lie is a lie, and never be tricked."

"Better never trick'd and never truth'd than sometimes tricked and sometimes truthed."

"Who said that?"

"William V. The diplomat."

"No, I didn't."

The two regarded the wall of the sewer in silence for the next few moments. Then they continued their subterranean journey, and when they turned around, they saw that they were on the threshold of the entrance to the steam tunnels. The vapors filled the tunnel, and the red foam of sewage sprayed out of the pipes.

"It's late, so I have to go now," someone behind them said.

They turned to the speaker, it was the tramp from before, that they had murdered. Or perhaps it was a different tramp, they were not sure.

"I can go no further," he said in a low voice, "my mind is troubled. A terror comes to me from the depths of the labyrinth, as though something large and dreadful was on my left, and something small and dreadful on my right."

Charlie didn't blink:

"That would be me and my friend, respectively," He said.

They began to beat the tramp, but he was too fast for them. He staggered to his feet, raised his arms and started to chant in his native tongue. For a few moments nothing happened, but then the sewer machinery hissed in protest. A boulder the size of a man flew from the throat of the steam generator and rammed into the surface of the water. The carved stone was surrounded by a circle of diamonds. A cloud of steam immediately appeared, and the vagrant disappeared in it. Jack and Charlie were left to ponder the meaning of the mysterious events.

"You seem to be cursed," said Jack

"Told you he was weird."

"This is a coincidence."

"It's a miracle, Jack, don't you see what this means? We're finally, well and truly, devils. Which is to say: Equal to the Devil. No more compromises, I tell you, it's only a matter of time."

"That's your 'wise man' talking."

"So what?"

"So, how did you learn this language?"

"Oh, I studied the Amharic and Ewe languages in school. I picked it up by pure chance, because the Scythians sponsored a language camp."

"I see. The Government. Great."

"Just so."

Charlie cocked his head: "I wouldn't get carried away though. You know, Jack, this world has some terrible things in it. I mean, look around you. This whole country could blow up tomorrow. Of course, that's not exactly true. It's also a-"

Jack & Charlie Become Pirates. Cap. XVI.

THe best part about the cannon was how it made him feel when he shot it. He felt different, more powerful, bigger than he already was. And if he could become different by using a piece of wood as a weapon, then maybe he did have to use it that way. Maybe that's what weapons were for.

They weren't supposed to be used to hurt people. Weapons were tools, like a hammer. A hammer isn't meant to hit someone. The hammer is only good at hitting nails. But let a man find out that a nail can kill someone, and he might find another use for his hammer.

"What do you think, Jack? Do we have enough money left over to buy a new sailboat? One with sails that don't leak. Not one that leaks a little bit. No, no,—we need a boat where nothing leaks! You know what I'm saying? Then we won't have to carry buckets around anymore; carrying water on our heads. We'll just hook up a hose and take a shower! Or better yet, put a toilet on board. You know, like a regular toilet, where you can sit down and shit on it. What do you think? Can we get a toilet on this thing?"

Charlie was having one of his "idea times," Jack knew; they had been together long enough that he knew what Charlie was talking about when he started to say words like "we" and "us" and "our."

"I think we have enough money to buy a new sailboat," Jack stated, "but I don't see how we can afford a new toilet on the boat. Isn't a toilet some kind of plumbing device? Don't they cost extra? I mean, besides being expensive, they're also tricky. I've seen those toilets at Home Depot. There's a bunch of them stacked up in one of those big metal containers. Some of them are marked £80, and others are marked £50, and some are marked £100. I don't know exactly what any of those numbers mean except that the more money you pay for a toilet—the better it works. I guess there must be all kinds of ways to make a toilet work. Maybe they come in different sizes. Maybe they have fancy features. Maybe they have a toilet seat you can put your bum on..."

Charlie regarded Jack:

"Blimey, did you snort up a bifter or something?"

"No, Charlie, I didn't. I'm serious. We should buy a bucket instead of a toilet."

"Bloody hell, Jack, no!"

"Why? Are you afraid to shit in a bucket? Don't worry, I'll carry the bucket."

Charlie pondered this:

"Well, I suppose we wouldn't have to pay anyone to pump out the holding tank. We wouldn't have to pay someone to haul away the waste either."

"What kind of boat are we even talking, Charlie?"

Charlie looked thoughtful for a moment:

"A sailing boat, I guess. Sailboats have to be careful not to run aground because they can sink easily, right? So I guess we should buy a big boat. Something that will hold lots of cargo. How about a yacht? Those are nice boats, aren't they? Big, fancy yachts, like the ones that rich people ride around on. Why shouldn't we be rich people? There's a lot of stuff in this world that's worth money. I bet there are yachts we could buy. One of them could probably have its own toilet. I mean, if someone wanted to spend the money on a yacht, I imagine they would want a toilet on it too. Right? Wouldn't they? I mean, I don't know what else you could do with a toilet, other than piss and shit in it. I mean, you can't eat a toilet, can you?"

"Don't do that, Charlie. People don't usually eat toilets. They're full of shit and pee. So, I don't think you should do that. I mean, you might get sick. And if you got sick, you'd have to stay in bed until you recovered. I don't think you'd like being stuck in bed. That's boring. I mean, there's nothing to do when you're lying around and you don't feel good."

"I'm not sick, Jack, I just like eating the shit out of a toilet. If you know what I mean."

"I'm not sure I do."

"Look, I think we are getting far afield of what's really important,—we need to become rich so that we can buy a new sailboat. We're talking about spending money on a yacht... you know how expensive yachts are!? How long before we can afford a boat? Ten years? Fifty years? Maybe as long as our entire lives. And we'd still be poor, too. Poor as beggars."

"Well... perhaps we should get some money."

"How?"

"Piracy, Charlie. We do what pirates do. We rob people. Steal their boats... rob people in boats. Go around robbing people and taking their money. Then we'll buy a boat, and I think I've figured out a great name for our boat."

"Alright, well, we'll need a boat."

"Oh, right."

As they spoke, they noticed a motor boat with a couple in it. The boat was parked near the dock where they had just come ashore. There was nothing unusual about the motor boat. It appeared to be a normal family boat, something that people might ride around on in the summer.

"That's weird," said Jack, "I wonder why they're here. There's a little island over there. I bet they're going to go swimming."

"You think so?"

Jack squinted toward the beach:

"Let's steal that boat!"

With that, the two charged toward the unsuspecting couple. At first, the woman did not seem to notice that anything was wrong. She and her husband were engaged in conversation, they talked about their children.

Jack, who had been watching them talk, suddenly ran over and kicked the man in his shin. At first, the man thought he was having an attack of cramps, so quick was Jack, so ruthless, so ferocious with his kicking; but then, he saw the knife that Jack was holding.

Charlie had already pulled his own dagger out of his waistband and begun stabbing the woman. With each stab, Charlie shouted: "We are thieves!"

Jack grabbed the woman by the hair and pulled her face close to his. In a voice, loud enough for everyone around them to hear, he said: "Give me your cash and jewels! Give me everything you have!"

Jack began to squeeze the woman's neck, choking off her air supply. He had found out that this worked well at distracting people while Charlie stabbed them. He squeezed harder on the

woman's neck until she collapsed to the ground. Her husband tried to defend her, but Charlie stabbed him in the leg.

While the woman's husband lay on the ground bleeding, Jack knelt beside her. She coughed blood and gasped for breath. Jack continued to strangle the young woman. She struggled, but Jack's hand was stronger than hers. Finally, the woman gave up the struggle and lay limp and motionless, like the woman that Jack had killed in the jungle.

"What jungle?"

"Don't you remember, Charlie? We came out of the jungle, didn't we?"

"No, I don't think so."

"You don't remember killing that woman at the gas station? Remember, I told you that we were going to rob that woman?"

"There was a gas station in a jungle?"

"Well of course! How would you refuel your car in the jungle without one? Come on, Charlie, remember?"

"What is it you want me to remember? We came out of the jungle, and we killed a lady at a gas station."

The two look at each other in confusion.

The man, still alive, groaned weakly. His wife, however, lay motionless and blue, and her eyes stared into space.

Jack suddenly remembered something that he had forgotten earlier. He reached over and picked up Charlie's dagger. He held it in both hands and examined it closely.

"Where'd you get this, Charlie?"

"Oh, this? I found it in this old crate that a woman was selling at a garage sale."

"Ah, well, we have a ship now, Charlie. What do we do with it?"

"We plunder another one, of course. We're pirates! We're the ones who are supposed to do this, Jack. We're the ones who are supposed to steal boats, right?"

"So, what are you going to call the boat?"

"Well... I was thinking: 'The Stinking Shipman,' but then, maybe it should be something else..."

"Well, what do you think about 'The Pooper,' or The Foul Pooper?"

"Nah, that sounds kind of gross and unoriginal."

"How about: 'The Shiddlinger.' What do you think of that?"

"That sounds like some kind of disease or something."

"We need something less childish and more professional. How about: 'Jolly Roger?' "

"No," said Charlie, "I don't like that either. It sounds like some sort of sexual reference."

"How about: 'Rumpelstiltskin?' "

"What? That's a children's story! I don't want to be Rumpelstiltskin. Besides, that's a terrible name for a boat!"

Jack shrugged his shoulders and thought for a moment. Then he smiled broadly and exclaimed:

"I have just thought of the most perfect name in the world. It's going to be called-"

"Pirate Ship," Charlie cut in, anticipating what jack was about to say.

"Yes, exactly!" Jack said, enthusiastically.

"*Pirate Ship,* that has a nice ring to it."

"Yes. Pirate Ship sounds just right."

With that, the two made the rounds across the lake. They came across a party boat. Presently, the people there were dancing to the hit song, "Stomp Your Feet," by the musical group, "The Ting Tings."

The song went as follows:

Stomp your feet, everybody just move,
All the people get together and groove!
We'll party like it's midnight in the summertime,
Gonna keep on dancin' till we blow our minds!

With one slash of a knife, Jack cut the ropes that held the rope that pulled the boat back and forth across the water. He and Charlie quickly boarded the vessel.

Charlie drew his gun and pointed it at the crowd on the boat: "Alright everyone, this is what you're going to do: Get

out of this boat, or I will ſtab you! We need to ſteal this boat so that we can go to sea. Then you won't have to dance anymore!"

Jack violently flung two men from the boat and tore at the helm. With a blood-curdling roar, he drove the boat toward the beach, where some swimmers were enjoying themselves. Screams of agony were heard as he mercilessly shattered their bodies againſt the rocky shore.

"I think we should take the boat back to the mainland and sell it there, Jack. We can make more money that way, than we could by selling it here."

"Nah, Charlie, we've got to buy a bigger boat."

"Well, we have two boats now!"

Jack conceded that point:

"Right, I'll tie them together."

He did so and, after that, he turned to the captives:

"Hey, look at that!" he said, "we're surrounded by women."

The two men laughed at this. But then, with one swift movement, Charlie shot a woman in the head, killing her. She was dead before she hit the water:

"I'm not sure I'm in a raping mood, Jack, but I like the idea of kidnapping. I think we should kidnap one or two of those girls and take them to a shack somewhere and-"

"No," Jack said, firmly, "I don't think we should do that. You remember what happened laſt time we took a girl to a shack?"

"Oh yes... I remember it quite well."

"Well, let's not make the same miſtake twice, shall we? We'll leave the women here. What we should do is ſteal their clothes."

"Wait a minute," said Charlie, "what if we juſt keep them as ransom? They'll pay us big bucks to get their women back."

"Well, it wouldn't be so bad to take a few hoſtages, eh? But I guess we shouldn't rape these ones."

"Yeah, we'll have plenty of opportunity to do that later. What is rape, anyways?"

"I think the great Indian philosopher and scholar Raśamāni

defined rape as: 'A man sticking his penis into a woman and having intercourse with her against her will.' "

"Sounds about right to me. Wait, that can't have been it. There must be more to it than just that, Charlie?"

Charlie stared at his friend blankly.

With that, Charlie grabbed his dagger and walked over to one of the girls on the ship, who was bound and gagged. He walked up to her and put the tip of his knife under her chin, then raised her head to looked at her face:

"Let's see..." he thought, "I can do this or that, or maybe this... hmm... maybe that. Oh, no, wait... No! That's not it!"

He pulled his hand away from her throat and slapped her face several times.

One of the captives cried:

"What in heaven's name is going on? Who are you people? Don't you realize this is a lake by a park? Are you insane?"

"Oh, we're pirates," Jack answered, "that's why. We want to steal your boat, so that we can go plunder some other ships."

As they descended on her, her screams quivered in the air like a banshee's cackle. She pleaded for mercy, but to no avail. Jack and Charlie took turns grabbing onto her body with their powerful hands. She felt them penetrate violently into her delicate skin, ripping her apart as if she were tissue paper. The salty tears mixed with the lake water and crimson blood around her, as they gorged themselves until she was left an empty shell of what she once was. Her sobs turned to silence, realizing that not only had she been violated, but worse, it would be impossible for her to ever bear children.

"Well, now," said Jack to Charlie, "that wasn't too hard. What's next?"

"I think we should kill every man, woman and child aboard the next ship we see, except for one, so that we will have someone to pilot the boat when we leave."

"Good idea."

Charlie nodded in agreement:

"Very good, my friend. Very good indeed. What shall we call our ship?"

"We'll name it: 'The Bloody Mary'!"

Jack moved the thing.

"No, no, no, Jack, that's a terrible name. It doesn't even sound piratey."

"It's a classic name, it's been around for hundreds of years."

"Yeah, but pirates are supposed to be original. We can't just keep repeating names."

"How about the: 'Gilligan's Skiff'?"

"That doesn't have a ring to it, does it? I mean, if you called a boat 'Gilligan's Skiff,' then who would sail it? Who could be Gilligan, I ask you?"

"Well, maybe we could have someone named Gilligan. He could be a little guy with a mop of hair. And the boat is a dinghy, or a skiff. Something like that."

"A what?"

"A dinghy."

"Oh... that's kind of interesting. How did you come up with that word? Is it short for something?"

"Look, we need to find a name, Charlie."

Charlie rolled his eyes:

"Blimey, Jack, what are we doing? Are we really gonna name every ship we commandeer?"

"I would hope so. Wouldn't you name every child you had?"

Charlie paused for a moment and then laughed:

"Okay, okay,—I get your point."

Jack wondered for a moment and then said:

"Alright, how about the: 'Aquatic Tango'?"

"That's brilliant Jack, positively brilliant."

With that, they drove their new ship, with the name "Aquatic Tango." As they sailed further out into lake, their eyes were opened to an entirely different world. The deep blue waters surrounded them as far as the horizon could see.

"Look, Jack!" Charlie called out, There's another ship! And there are people aboard!"

Jack & Charlie Seek Out the Astrolabe. Cap. XVII.

FOr several hours, Jack and Charlie were rummaging through various boxes and sacks in the basement of some old house.

"Hey Jack, you ever play Crooks & Crannies?"

"No Charlie, can't say I have."

"You know the one, it's the fantasy game with the dungeons and dragons."

"Can't be, Charlie, who would call a role-playing game that. It's like calling a science fiction film 'patricide.' "

"Right, so how are we going to find the marvelous device?"

"The astrolabe? Not down here, that's already clear."

"Right, Jack; back to the balloon then."

The hot air balloon, which was festooned with the letters 'A-S-T-R-O-L-E,' was anchored in front of the house by ropes connected to its two main poles. The ropes ran to two separate trees, they tied the balloons together with an intricate knot system that would ensure the balloons didn't come untethered in flight. They also tied a tarp over the basket of the balloon as well.

"How're we gonna fly this thing, anyway?" Jack asked.

"That's just it, Jack," Charlie said, grinning, "we don't, it flies *us*."

Jack nodded ponderously, then turned his attention to the picture of the astrolabe. He was holding the photograph up to his face, as if staring into its eye sockets.

They packed up and went to the local grocery store, which was perched on a cliff overlooking the fjords of Xi'an, a province in Albanian-controlled Northern China. They had to stop once and let Charlie rest from the exertion of carrying the basket, but soon enough, they were back in the air and making their way toward the border.

They had picked up some food and water from the store to supplement what they already had with them. The sun was shining bright overhead, the wind was gentle and pleasant, carrying them through the sky at a comfortable pace.

"How does a hot air balloon work anyway, Charlie?"

"Well, you see, it's hot, and it's a balloon, yeah? And the sky is cold, and we all know that hot goes into cold, like when you touch a woman's belly, so the balloon go up into the sky."

"But my heart is cold."

"No, Jack, the balloon is hot."

"No, my heart, Charlie..."

"Are you having one of those 'heart attacks' then?"

"What's that?"

"A cardiac arrest."

"My chiropractor's never been under arrest."

"Oh yeah? I bet you think all doctors are quacks, too?"

"Well, I'd like to think I have my head screwed on right."

They landed on the edge of the lake, which was surrounded by trees, and took stock of their situation.

Jack checked his watch: "It's almost nine o'clock, I think we should set out tomorrow morning. We're about five hundred miles South of here and we've got to make it to Rome. I'm guessing another four to six hours. If we start now, we should be able to reach Rome before sunrise."

"Good luck, Jack, be safe, and good night," Charlie said, standing up from the tarp and moving to his quarter of the balloon, "see you soon."

They set off, the winds were blowing strong across the lake, but they were moving slowly and steadily.

"All right," Jack said, "says here on this picture that the astrolabe is located deep in the heart of an ancient Roman aqueduct, or at least near one."

"So, what?" Charlie asked, "we're just going to go down into a ditch and look for it?"

"Well, maybe; not exactly... we are in China, after all."

Jack shrugged, looking over at the lake. The dark waters looked so calm, and far below them the surface reflected the moonlight like a mirror.

"A mirror of the mind," Jack whispered, "and then it will see my heart."

"What's that, Jack?"

"Nothing Charlie, just reflecting on the reflections of the Moon..."

They set course towards the North, away from Xi'an and its fjords, toward the Great Wall of China.

Jack checked the clock on his wrist-watch for the time of sunset on the West coast of Africa. They then set the course to the isle of Sakhalin, a contested island that had seen much invasion from nations as far-flung and diverse as India, Turkey, Japan, Britain, and Russia. It was on this island, which had been settled by the Votadini people, that Jack knew he could find the answer to his riddle. They set the balloon down, tied it securely, and walked to the nearest beach to wash up from the exertions of their flight.

Charlie walked over to the edge of the lake and stared into the surface. When Jack joined him, he saw Charlie staring into the blackened waters of the lake, as if in trance.

"Why do lakes have such a high albedo, Jack?"

Jack shrugged, he'd never given it any thought before, but when he really looked at it, it was clear: Lakes were black, and oceans were blue. Why did lakes have such a high albedo?

"And why did they drown?" Jack wondered aloud.

Charlie shook his head, still staring into the black water:

"I wish I knew, Jack. I wish I knew why lakes were made this way. It just seems wrong, somehow, to make a lake the color of a corpse."

Jack didn't say anything for a moment. He stood next to Charlie, staring at the black water of the lake.

Suddenly, from out of the darkness, Jack spied a figure skydiving from above. It was a Chinese astronomer, dressed in a traditional yellow robe. He was descending gracefully through the night air, heading directly for them...

Jack and Charlie immediately jumped into action. They scrambled to untie the balloon's tethers and take to the skies again before this strange newcomer could reach them. The as-

tronomer seemed taken aback by their sudden vigor, but nevertheless kept his course towards them with remarkable grace.

Just when they were about to lift off, the brave explorer caught hold of one of the balloon's ropes! He pulled himself up onto it as they soared away into the night sky, still confused by their haste.

"What are you doing?" Jack shouted down at him anxiously, "are you an astronaut?"

The man shook his head vigorously as he clung onto the rope for dear life: "No sir! An *astronomer*!"

"Listen mate, we need to know where the astrolabe is."

"I told you I'm an astronomer!"

"Fine, then, tells us where the astronom is!"

The man looked at them, terrified.

They pulled him onto the basket and began to beat him, stomping and kicking him viciously. The man writhed and screamed, trying to defend himself, but the two Englishmen were too strong for him.

"I'm just a simple astronomer, leave me alone!"

"He's trying to keep the secrets for himself! Beat him again Charlie!"

"I've never kept secrets myself, Mr. Astronomer," Charlie said, "truth is a hidden thing, it has been since time immemorial. We can't see it or touch it, yet we still seek it from the depths of our souls. Even the ancients had their own ways of understanding truth; astrolabes were used by ancient civilizations to measure the apparent positions of celestial bodies and make astronomical calculations. They believed that as they watched the night sky, they could read into its secrets and uncover things that words could never reveal to them... I often marvel at how little we know in this world. We can barely comprehend the sheer enormity of nature's power and beauty, much less its other secrets. Yet, despite these limits on our knowledge, I think there is something special about seeking the truth that drives us forward, no matter what. Even if we don't understand it fully, or even at all... And astrolabes are a perfect

metaphor for that: Mysterious devices made to decipher mysteries which can only be found through dedication and courage to venture into the unknown."

Having spoken his words of wisdom, Charlie grabbed hold of the man and threw him off the balloon. The explorer was gone in an instant, plunging downwards into the dark abyss below. As he plummeted to his death, he thought how much he regretted having been so arrogant as to have thought he could read truth from the night sky.

Glib at the thought of having such a powerful tool in their hands, Jack's eyes lit up, as he imagined the many possibilities of the astrolabe:

"Think of it!" He said to Charlie, "we could use it to communicate with distant galaxies, discover forgotten secrets of nature, or even find hidden pathways between the Heavens and Earth!"

Charlie eagerly agreed:

"It could even predict events that have already come to pass, divine upcoming storms, navigate through uncharted seas, or even contact dead spirits!"

The two of them fell quiet as they delved deeper into their own fantasies of this mysterious ancient object.

Jack and Charlie became so wrapped up in conversation that they forgot all sense of rationality and started attributing spiritual traits to the astrolabe. The more they talked, the more extraordinary abilities they believed it had: From manipulating time and space, to bringing lost souls back from eternity, and revealing secret doors in lonely forests.

"You know, Jack, I think think I'm ready for the responsibility of ruling the stars. I'm hardly responsibly for my own children, as things stand."

"You have children, Charlie?"

"No, that's my point, Jack! If I can't take on the responsibility of fathering children, then how am I to become some sort of astral emperor?"

"Hold on, Charlie, we've never said anything about 'empire' we were just talking about ruling."

"We were talking about how we were gonna fly all around the world with our astral powers. It sounds like a good plan to me!"

"I don't think I'll be needing that many powers to get by, really," Jack mused aloud as he gazed down at the waters below him. The lake was almost completely dark now, but Jack thought that there might still be something in the depths below, and so he began scanning the waters intently. After a moment, his eyes lit up. There, in the murky black waters, was what looked to be the glint of light.

"Here it is! I've got it!" Jack shouted excitedly.

Charlie joined him, looking down.

Jack's excitement suddenly seemed to fade, and he started looking into the waters in dismay.

"But it's too deep, Charlie, it's way past the waterline. We've got to bring it to shore."

"Blimey, Jack, how on Earth are we supposed to do that? We are on a bloody air balloon!"

Jack looked up, thinking hard:

"We're going to need some sort of pole or stick to reach it."

Aloft, some forty feet in the air, the two friends looked out over the lake, searching for any possible objects that would serve as a makeshift pole.

"Hey, Charlie, what do you suppose happens when a hot air balloon goes over the water?"

Charlie shrugged: "Well, the hot air just comes out, doesn't it?" He paused and thought for a moment, "we're bound to descend now, Jack; that water looks colder than the sky."

"Right Charlie, good thinking."

Jack turned the gas valve, and they began descending in their anticipation that the waters would pull the balloon down.

The hot air balloon fell quickly, but just before it hit the water, Jack turned the valve back on again. The balloon burst upwards into the night sky.

"That's a lot more fun than going down," Charlie n.

Jack nodded: "You're right, let's go back up again."

They started the ascent once more, but this time the hot air balloon started to fall faster. They both watched as the balloon slowly sank lower and lower, until it finally hit the water.

"Look Charlie, the balloon is sinking!"

"Yeah, I can see that, Jack, but why are we falling with it?"

"We're hotter than the lake, this shouldn't be happening!'"

"It's the balloon Jack! We've grown too attached. It's trying to take us down with it!"

Jack was furious: "I'll show it who's boss, I'll make it float!"

He turned the valve again and the balloon began to rise.

"What the hell was that, Jack? You scared me half to death."

"That balloon wanted to go down, that's what!"

"Well, it didn't, did it?"

"What do you mean?"

"The balloon went up because you turned the valve on again."

Jack stared at Charlie blankly, then he slowly nodded:

"Oh, right, yeah."

Jack peered down at the lake. There was no sign of the glint, it was, perhaps, just a trick of the light.

"Hey, Jack... Maybe the astrolabe is just that—*astral*."

"Are you saying we should reach for the stars? We'd be no better than that Chinese astronaut we just murdered."

"First of all, Jack, you cede all sense of nationality at a certain altitude. He was no more Chinese than we are clouds."

"I don't know if I agree with that."

"Look here, we are getting far afield of the topic."

"There are no fields in the sky, Charlie."

"Blimey, Jack, I'm just saying we should look higher, not lower, if we seek to attain our goal."

"But you're not telling me how we can get it."

Charlie thought for a moment:

"We need to think big, Jack."

"Like what?"

"Like... like a *ladder*."

Jack stared at Charlie:

"A ladder?" He asked.

"Yeah, a ladder."

"A ladder, you say?"

"Yeah, a ladder. It's the only way to get it."

"You said a ladder?"

As they spoke, a rogue stork flew overhead and assailed the balloon.

"It's a bird! The only species known to fly!" Jack yelled.

Charlie took out his pistol and promptly began firing at the bird.

"No, no, no! Charlie! You'll burst the balloon!"

But it was too late, Charlie failed to shoot the bird, but also avoided damaging the balloon. Instead, one of his shots strayed into the gas supply, and the balloon burst into flames.

The pair of Englishmen plummeted into the depth of the lake below. The lake known as *Lake Baikal* was the deepest in the world, at over eight-hundred fathoms deep. The waters were cold, dark, and murky, and the two boys were glad to have survived their plunge.

Jack looked up at the sky.

Charlie, for his part, looked at the horizon:

"So here we are, at the edge of the world," he said, "what do you suppose lies beyond that?"

"Well, I don't know, Charlie, maybe it's heaven."

"Or hell... we've certainly done enough bad things in our lives to warrant one or the other."

As they watched the tarnished basket sink into the icy depths below, Jack shuddered:

"Blimey, Charlie! This lake sure is cold! No wonder the balloon went down..."

"You turned the valve, Jack," Charlie reminded him.

Once again, he was met with a blank expression:

"Oh, right," Jack said, finally.

The cold was unforgiving and they quickly grew exhausted. They both began to shiver uncontrollably as the temperature dropped further. The numbing water chilled them to their souls, and pulled at their hearts, making it difficult for them to

sleep. They drifted for some time, each took a gasp of the sweet air, but when they tried to inhale again,—water filled their lungs.

"I'm starting to see things, Jack," Charlie said, between chattering teeth, "I think I have hypothermia."

"That would be hypnothermia," came the tortured correction.

"Does that mean those boats aren't real then?"

In the distance, two motorboats with carved horse and reindeer heads charged through the water. They were heading their way, ready to brutalize whatever hapless creature stood in their path. The pair of Englishmen held their breaths as they watched the boats come closer into view. They could see the engraved eyes of fierce animals carved into the wooden figureheads, and a ferocious smile on each boatman's face. There was no time for Jack and Charlie to escape or hide from them,—it was too late.

The aquatic nomads yelled with angry voices and kicked them further into the frigid waters. They struggled to keep their heads above water as they were pulled further down into the depths. The Water-Buryats left no chance for hesitation, for mercy, or for a chance at escape. Each yank found Jack and Charlie closer to an icy death.

The pain was indescribable, torturing them in ways worse than any imaginable nightmare. The Water-Buryats kept pulling them beneath the surface, trying to gag and smother them as much as possible before tipping them back up in cold waves of agony again. With each new plunge followed by a freeze-up on their necks, the terror of waterboarding became more and more real.

After that, they brought them aboard, and began relentlessly beating them with oars and paddles. The blows rained down upon them from all sides, leaving Jack and Charlie in a terrible state. The water mongols laughed and taunted them in their native tongue. However, upon realizing the two were Englishmen, one of the assailants spoke in broken English, saying: "You are water! You are nothing but water to be oared!"

From his bleeding mouth, Charlie said:

"I'm not water, are you water Jack?"

"No, Charlie, I think these gentlemen are confused," croaked Jack in response, "perhaps this very body of water wronged them in the past."

As the beating continued, Jack and Charlie felt their consciousness slip away. They couldn't take the pain any longer, and their minds retreated into a dark void.

When they finally awoke, they found themselves on the shore of the lake. Barely able to move, they found themselves crawling their way into the frigid forest of Siberia.

They crawled the shoreline like seal-beasts. After a moment of rest, they began making their way towards the forests, as quick as their broken bodies would allow. Charlie—following some vestigial instinct—began attempting to forms some sort of shelter out of various twigs.

As the structure began to vaguely resemble a tent, Charlie —in his excitement—cut himself on one of the sharpened sticks. He knelt down and kept his gaze fixed at his wound, and soon noticed that there seemed to be something winking back at him in its depths,—like some tiny being was trying to communicate something with him through the reflection in his blood-stained hand.

"Charlie, you're bleeding."

"No, Jack... I'm reding..."

The misty fog had set in. They were huddled under something or whatever, and from all corners they could hear the howling of the wind and the wolves.

"Wolves," Charlie said, grimly, "creatures of the night, and sometimes the day... We have to keep moving."

Jack nodded: "Yes, we do."

As the pair crept deeper into the forest, they could see the dark shapes of wolves slinking toward them.

"What's the plan, Jack? How are we going to survive?"

"I don't know, Charlie, but we've got to try."

The wolves growled and snarled. Then they leapt upon them, biting at them and tearing at their skin. They fought back

with whatever they could find. Charlie wielded a rock, while Jack used a sharp stick he found nearby. The wolves, however, were not so easily defeated. They tore and ripped at the them until both fell to the ground, exhausted.

The wolves, however, had just begun. Jack and Charlie lay there, trying to regain their strength, as the wolves bit and gnawed at their flesh. Their limbs grew numb from the cold, but still they tried to fight back. They tried to keep their eyes open, for it was the only way to stay alive.

Then, they heard a shot ring out. The wolves dispersed, and Jack and Charlie found themselves staring up at a contingent of armed men.

"The dream is not dead, Charlie!" Shouted Jack, "the astrolabe will be ours! These men are here to help us!"

The last words were meant to be emphasized with the shake of Charlie's shoulders, but Jack was to weak, so all he could muster was a light brush.

The men who approached seemed to be soldiers of the Muscovite Caliphate. Jack and Charlie attempted to speak to them in what they assumed to be Russian.

"چتۏەتۏ بۏریتی؟" One of the Muscovites said.

The men, not interested in taking a pair of—what appeared to him to be—Buryats in for questioning, began to savagely beat the two Englishmen with their rifles.

Jack and Charlie fell to the ground, battered and bruised. The men kicked them into the lake where they sank beneath the surface. As the water closed over their heads, the men laughed and taunted them in Russian, saying:

"وەرنس ق وۏدە غدە تەبە مەستۏ آل مآدژۏدژ!"

"Did... did they say 'magic,' Jack?" Charlie asked between mouthfuls of water and blood, "maybe they were trying to protect the astrolabe!"

"The astrolabe isn't magic Charlie... it's bigger than magic... Maybe even bigger than God," Jack said, as he spat out a tooth.

The two resumed floating in the waters in silence for a while until they noticed the water becoming warmer. Warm enough

to counteract their imminent hypothermia. The two peered into the waters below and saw what looked to be glowing outlines on buildings somewhere at the bottom of the lake. There appeared to be a quite advanced civilization of some sort existing down there.

They kept on floating in the warm currents until they were washed ashore on the other end of the lake. With visible steam emanating from their battered bodies they crawled onto the beach and sat there for a while.

Jack noticed something shiny among a small gathering of garbage near the waters. He picked it up. It appeared to be some sort of star-shaped Christmas decoration.

"This is the astrolabe, Charlie."

"Is it then, Jack?"

"Yeah."

"Alright."

Jack clenched his teeth together as he opened his mouth for a deep breath. Then he coughed up blood.

Charlie tried to breathe.

And then,—then they were *stars*. In fact, that's all they had ever been, stars,—shining like no other stars, shining forever, shining through eternity, shining through the eyes of God. They were stars. Real, true stars, that shone brightly against an endless night sky over a place called Baikonur... Russia... Kazakhstan... Khabarovsk... Bukhara... Afghanistan... Khorasan... Samarkand... Tashkent... Uzbekistan... Kyrgyzstan... Tashkent... Tashkent... Tashkent... Tashkent... Wherever it was that had been destroyed by an alien invader long ago in a distant place: The Tashkent Nebula...

Jack & Charlie Go on a Road Trip. Cap. XVIII.

For a change, Charlie was sitting in the back seat of Jack's car. It was his car, Jack had bought it from him. He'd been surprised by how much he liked driving, and that was without even having to worry about keeping up with traffic.

"I don't know what this is all about," Charlie said, "why

have we been driving aimlessly for the last twenty minutes?"

Jack kept his eyes on the road as he answered:

"I'm not sure myself. I seem to remember us deciding to drive across the whole of Britain... 'a road trip,' you said."

In the distance they could see the sea. They drove past the beachfront, then turned off onto a narrow country lane that ran between fields full of sheep. The sun was setting over the horizon as Jack pulled into the driveway of a farmhouse.

"What's this then?" Charlie asked, almost out of duty than of curiosity."

"It's where we're staying tonight."

Charlie looked at the house. It was old and run-down but quaintly charming, which made it look like the sort of place Charlie would end up living in after he became a successful writer.

"Jack, you know how I feel about barns."

"I do?"

"Yeah, you know, the sort of thing that gives people nightmares."

"A barn won't give you nightmares, Charlie, it'll just give you a good night's sleep."

"Good night's sleep my arse! There's a subtle horror to the saccharine rurality of these places."

"What places?"

"Barns... the bloody eeriness is to much. It's like, it's like..." Charlie searched for the right words to describe it, "it's like the barn is watching you. You know, like, you know how you get when you're in the middle of a really good book, or you're trying to write something really scary, and it's going great, and you've got the plot all figured out and everything, and then, all of a sudden, you realize you haven't actually thought about what you're writing about? It's like that, except, instead of not thinking about it—you're thinking about it too hard."

Finally, after a few minutes of intense searching, Jack emerged from the house with a satisfied expression on his face.

"Nothing here," he said as he walked back to Charlie and got

into the car.

"Let's go then," Charlie said as he hopped in and put on his seat-belt.

Jack nodded with agreement and started up the engine of the rust-bucket they had stolen from some old barn they stumbled upon at one point during their road trip. As it roared to life, Charlie looked at Jack with an excited glint in his eye,—it was time to get back on the road again.

The night sky was turning an ever more velvety blue by the second. As they drove away from the farmhouse, a strange sensation grew in their chests. It was a mixture of anticipation and dread. It seemed to be pulling them towards *Chern Wyl*, that peculiar tourist trap. They could feel the excitement rising within, as the darkness of the unknown beckoned.

Nestled between the rolling hills of Cornwall and Wales, Chern Wyl, a Junkyard that was the perfect spot for those looking for a quick adrenaline rush. Jack and Charlie had heard about it from a fellow traveler they had met on the road, and decided to check it out.

As they approached the entrance, they could hear the roar of engines and screams of excitement coming from inside.

They parked the car and made their way to the front desk where a gruff-looking man with a wild beard greeted them.

"Welcome to the Junkyard," he said, handing them a waiver to sign, "you guys here for the races?"

Jack and Charlie nodded eagerly, barely able to contain their excitement.

"Great," the man said, taking their waiver and money, "we'll get you set up with a car and show you the ropes. But let me warn you, this place isn't for the faint of heart."

"We're ready," Charlie said confidently.

The man chuckled: "I like your spirit. Follow me."

He led them through a maze of cars and trucks, until they reached the dump. Jack and Charlie looked around in awe at the impressive collection of cars in the dump. The Junkyard was not just some ordinary scrap yard, but a place where old

cars came to experience their last moments of glory. It was like a graveyard for cars, but they were being given a second chance at life.

The gruff-looking man pulled up to a rusted old vintage car with a fierce-looking engine:

"This one will do," he said, handing them the keys and a helmet, "but be careful, it's been known to get a little wild."

Charlie looked at Jack, his eyes wide with excitement:

"This is going to be splendid," he said, grinning.

Jack grinned back at him, his heart pounding in anticipation. They both climbed into the car and started the engine, the sound vibrating through their bodies.

As they pulled out onto the track, Jack and Charlie felt alive in a way they never had before, and it terrified them. They did not wish to feel any more alive than they were.

Finally, they saw the junkyard, the place where the cars were taken to die. It was a massive structure, built from the bones of old cars and other vehicles, and it loomed over them.

"This is the place," Charlie said.

"Yeah," Jack agreed.

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Yeah," Jack said, "it's just a car; we'll get a new one."

"From where?"

"Why, the junkyard."

"But why?"

"Because it's there."

Charlie was satisfied by this answer.

They solemnly watched as their car was scrapped, and began the search for a new one. No sooner did a hapless tourist arrive in an old Honda Civic, which they removed him from and took the vehicle away.

A rumble sounded, far, far in the distance—but a rumble nonetheless. Or the shadow of one, an echo. So echoic was it, that, perhaps, there had not been a rumble at all,—that the sound was merely a figmentary projection, caused by the lack of blood flow in their cerebral hemispheres.

The sky darkened. The stars vanished. The heavens became pitch black. The two were left by the world to sort out their affairs.

"Well," said Charlie, "now the fun begins."

"Well, shit," Jack muttered.

The two were standing on the porch of a derelict farmhouse that once must have been a beautiful building. The house itself looked as if it hadn't seen maintenance since the days of Queen Victoria.

"What do you suppose happened here?" Charlie asked.

"I don't know, maybe someone died here?"

"Yeah, the Celts."

"Perhaps, Charlie, perhaps... or perhaps,—perhaps the Celts were just running away from those crazy druids."

"Either way, we should probably get inside before the sun comes up."

"Just a sec," Jack said, walking through the doorway, "we're only here to refuel, after that, well-"

Charlie stopped to pause. The ludicrousness of being on a road trip! The utter idolatrousness of the idea that just "seeing the sites" was a worthy activity, that to indulge in nature's beauty was to deny the utter banality of life.

Jack examined the room for clues as to what might have happened. Charlie waited outside patiently.

Finally, after a few minutes of intense searching, Jack emerged from the house with a satisfied expression on his face:

"Nothing here," he said, as he walked back to the car.

"Let's go then," Charlie said, as he hopped in the car.

Jack nodded with agreement and started up the engine. As it roared to life, Charlie looked at Jack with an excited glint in his eye,—it was time to get back on the road again!

As they drove, Jack and Charlie talked about the things that mattered to them: The state of the world, the state of the nation, the state of their respective families. They were in the middle of discussing the relative merits of the British monarchy when they passed a small town called *Gwyned*.

"Hey, Charlie, let's ſtop there."

Charlie nodded and they continued driving.

"I wonder if they have a pub."

"Maybe," Charlie answered.

"That'd be nice. We haven't had a drink in ages."

"Yeah, I'm thirſty too."

They drove paſt the sign and into the village.

The village, they found, was bereft of any human life, save for a few ſtragglers.

"I guess everyone's in the pub."

Jack nodded: "That makes sense," he said, "I mean, it's a pub. What else would they be doing?"

"You think they're republicans, Jack?"

"What? No!"

"Well, we wouldn't be surprised."

"No! We wouldn't be surprised because it doesn't make sense. You can't be a republican and ſtill live in Britain."

Jack then explained what had happened to the Republican Party of Britain,—a great massacre, a bloody coup, and a violent uprising: "So, you see, they're not really a part of our society anymore," he concluded.

"I suppose," Charlie said.

"Besides," Jack went on, "they're not even a real political party. A real political party doesn't need votes! A real political party needs guns, and lots of 'em. And a lot of people to shoot. And that's juſt not possible in the UK."

"That's true," Charlie said, nodding.

They eventually found a pub and, to their surprise, there were only two other men inside it.

The pub was called the "Caledonia Arms," and as they walked in, the bartender was pouring some ale into a pint glass.

"What'll ye have?" The bartender asked them.

Jack looked at Charlie, but Charlie,—Charlie did not look at Jack. His eyes remained transfixed on the bartender, who, to be fair, seemed familiar, in the same way a ſtranger's face seems familiar when you've met him once before and he was ſtanding

next to you, or sitting behind you, but you can't quite remember where it was that you met.

Charlie turned around and looked at Jack again:

"Jack, we know this man," he said, "I know this man, I know him from here!"

"Where?" Jack asked, his voice a low growl, "yeah, right," he said with a snarl, "a con artist; look at these prices!" He pointed to the menu, "five pounds for a measly bowl of beans?"

"That's a steal! Jack, and for that price I could buy half an acre of land in Africa with what I'd have left over!"

The bartender asked again:

"And what'll ye have?"

Charlie paused and then spoke:

"I'll have what you're having."

"I'm not having anything."

"You mean to tell us that you to tend to the bar and don't have any drinks for yourself? Why, that's irresponsible to your own interests."

Jack nodded:

"It's like a fish eating its own tail,—it's the last thing it'll do."

"We were doing just fine... just fine," Charlie added.

"Actually we were doing fine."

"Yeah, but-"

"That's what's wrong with us!"

Charlie nodded sagely.

Jack smiled sagaciously.

"It's a cliche," Jack said, "get it? It's a cliché!"

"No, Jack-Jack, look, do you see-?"

"What?"

"Do you see, Jack?"

"Yes."

"So, look, Jack, look out there!"

"Charlie, I-I do see."

"Why? Look out there!"

"Oh yeah, look out there, there's a tree, and a couple of things hanging from it, and a wagon full of sticks, and a dead rat-"

"This is a road trip," Charlie stated, impassively.

With that, they returned to to their Honda Civic, and headed due West to a ferry, one that was headed to the hermit kingdom-republic of Ireland. However, they insisted on driving on the ferry boat, rather than remaining stationary, as this—they thought—would defeat the purpose of a road trip.

In a few hours they arrived to the Emerald Isle. The atmosphere was odd in a way, as if it were an alternate version of England, and yet still more familiar than any other place they had seen. The air seemed different, lighter, cooler, and there was a vaguely strange feeling of being watched, even though no one was around. Their minds began to wander as they drove through the rolling green hills, castles dotting the horizon like scattered jewels. They were struck by how many sheep there were; it almost felt like a living cascade of white cotton candy, and their fleecy coats shrouded the countryside. They took note of how eerily quiet it all felt,—there weren't any traffic noises or other signs of human life for miles around.

Jack pulled up over a hilltop and parked the car, which allowed them to take in even more breathtaking views, both from where they sat and into distant valleys hiding deep within them a wealth of history.

In the distance, they could make out small hamlets and villages, of which most were in ruins. But then they began to notice groups of people,—crowds huddled around fake trees and large glass buildings. They realized that these people weren't Irish at all, their skin was darker, short hair cropped close to their heads; these were the last remnants of Singapore's population, who had fled from their sinking country many years before. Having moved their substantial funds to Ireland, it was evident that these expatriates had transformed this pastoral land into a booming economy, one teeming with opportunity and growth. But, as Jack and Charlie looked upon the new inhabitants, they felt a solemn sadness overtake them, for though no longer in danger of extinction due to rising seas, the native Irish population had been largely supplanted by those remaining

Singaporeans who had escaped this calamity.

Suddenly, Jack felt a sense of urgency to experience the *real* Ireland, the one that was slowly fading away. He suggested to Charlie that they look for a local inhabitant who could give them an accurate account as to what had happened over the past few decades. Charlie agreed, and so they set off into the hills behind them in search of someone native Irish, a pure blooded Irishman.

Following some weathered signs atop ramshackle gates, they found their way to an old homestead deep in a valley, surrounded by large willow trees and sheep grazing lazily in nearby fields. As they approached, an old figure appeared at the door, with a wizened face and bright blue eyes. His white beard stretched from his chin nearly all the way down to his belt buckle, while his body was draped in homespun wool accompanied by patched leather shoes. He said nothing, but studied them quietly, before motioning them inside; this must be the last true Irishman living in this valley, Charlie thought.

The Irishman looked at them solemnly:

"Astheyemadewid, as it were thee Singaporeans!" he bellowed, "sure, the'ddone some swell thin's, but ye can't be denyin' they did their share of wrongs an' misdeeds as well."

Jack and Charlie said nothing.

The man continued his rant: "Ye, the lasses ef Singapuhr arr buskom, ze bezitful girls that be the strippers here, ye seem'nt tain't too awfully proud of them, ay?"

"No," Charlie said, hesitantly.

"Well, we've seen enough of dis theyahr, an' although it'dbe a 'haird, it'dbe a very good tain't anyhow!"

Then the Irishman passed out in a fit of laughter, clasping his knee to his chest. Charlie shook his head, he felt uneasy, his eyes had gotten caught in the twisting web of an old lie,—the only reasonable explanation of all that was occurring.

"What about the druids?" Jack asked.

The man's eyes widened in terror, he rushed to Jack, grabbing him by his pants:

"Teh drwds! Teh drwds!" He screamed, "why've you be herein' with dis here dud 'ear?! Jezus, thu ill 'ud hear da word-towards ye thuh rurnt, thu ill 'ud be gennered wid da mother-fudethand evah' werde an 'u thur! An' thu ill 'ud beas tha bas-tard's root-ſtirs! Ebery' creature evah' lived in dis valley—wat evah' evah' had a purrythat 'ud be in all dem lanes thu ill be doin' fra' day t'day—fra' day t'night—fra' everethin'—even thu very creatures, everethin' ye ebersonder—ne'er left 'is lonely abode except to come here!"

Jack sat down, blinking in disbelief. It all seemed too absurd to be true, but he said nothing as the Irishman continued his sad ramblings:

"Ye Engles are worssen then the Sinapuhrs! We'er meant t'be a race! Now we ridded thurthuh world of ther eremitics, da lasses! Blaucken'd to te cuhr, an' rid 'ere o' that dirty dudfather o' a witch! Then 'e spread a delusion to 'urt poor o' a nigger boy, t'blame 'im for 'er motherfudethan' e'en be in it! Twel-theth century folks think dis 'is sinapuhr, we are damned! When da motherfudethan' teethed ye, ze 'urrnution couldn' e'en come te'be eben a murmur!"

He ſtopped abruptly, his eyes were soft, and he seemed qui-eter than ever before. Charlie noticed a small sign in the corner of the room that read "Glens of Antrim Retirement Home." Suddenly, a young Singaporean female intern came into the room offering some biscuits to the old Irishman. He gave her the same sad look he had given Jack and Charlie earlier:

"Aye," he said, as he took a biscuit from her hand, "the lasses o' Singapuhr are buskom ones, too good for this world at times."

He watched her leave, but only for a second, before turning back to the Englishmen. His expression hardened:

"What in thunderation is a godsbedamneded biscuit!? I tell ye, the gleugh seeredge up dere'rf y'uhr o'r shopper, coddins! Ne 'ouse day't it wuz, it wuz deed bolognese out 'f the bode; aye, ae sirsmatter o' light food—but ye ken, the lad don' ne'er take hin' t' an' leek an' lot o' codgan' wuddler's! I'o says we dint' even have spag' withahur fudan; tey we got lollypipes an' cider!"

Jack and Charlie stared at him as he continued:

"An' ye doon't speak like an ould rustic! Ye look all da happah that's us made a bard or t'anthro in dis woord o' Ireland!"

The man continued to rant in this manner, and Jack and Charlie simply walked away.

The last thing they could clearly hear was:

"Da lord in the quadnta reals dey'r nyuck an' grin, but he woke up alone in a vast field in the middle of Nowhere, Nevada, still a-a-searchin' fo' a wife!"

The intern came back in the room with another tray:

"This one's for you Mr. O'Phee," she said, handing him a tinfoil wrapped sandwich.

Jack and Charlie saw this as their cue and headed back to their car. They were a tad disappointed, they had expected a land full of mystery, and all they found was an advanced health care system and a booming economy.

They decided to drive further into the unknown reaches of Ireland, searching high and low for a real Irish inhabitant. They passed fields of sheep, green hills, and quaint stone cottages. At every junction, they had to consult maps on their cell phones, in order to find their way in the dark back roads that winded their way throughout the country, as rural Ireland seemed to be devoid of street lights and other signs of modern life.

Finally, they found a sign pointing down a dirt road, which read: "Welcome to the West Coast of Ireland. Dangerous Roads Ahead."

This, said Jack, was the Ireland they were looking for. Their eyes grew wide, and they could feel the excitement rise. They could hardly contain themselves as they drove down that long road until it disappeared into the night. Suddenly, the car began to slow, and when it finally came to a stop, they could see a small town in front of them.

"We may be a bit late," said Charlie, "but I don't care, let's go."

They climbed out of the car and stretched. They were hungry and anxious to experience the culture of a place where people hadn't been corrupted by globalization.

They walked into the town center, but then, at every turn, they found something completely different. There were no cars, only bicycles and pedestrians. They had found themselves in the middle of a quiet village of hard-working, honest, plain citizens. They noticed that they were dressed differently and that they wore their hair a little longer. However, they were still mostly of clear Singaporean extraction, with certainly a few drops of Irish blood here and there, but overall not much to report.

There was only one thing to do,—buy some Guinness.

They bought a round for the bar, a local pub called *Paddy O'Brien's.* Almost all of the patrons were Singaporeans, as was the bartender."

"Say Jack, I thought you didn't like Guinness."

"I don't, but I have to support the local economy, I guess."

"When was the last time you had some old style Irish luck?"

"We'll see," Jack said with a smirk.

The bartender put the glasses on the bar, lit the green pipe, and they all raised their glasses:

"To old Ireland!" With that, Jack turned back to Charlie:

"What makes Ireland old anyways" He asked.

"Well, what makes *you* old, Jack?"

Jack stared off into the distance:

"Say Charlie," Jack asked, "if you leave a man in a room, does he get older?"

"Depends on the room, Jack. If the room is cold, he might last longer, like a refrigerator that keeps the food," Charlie grinned as he continued, "but if the room's a little too warm, time seems to get away from us faster. That's just old age."

Jack nodded in agreement, taking a sip of his Guinness:

"I think that's it, Charlie," he said, "time is the only measure we have for age."

"Yeah, it all comes down to the timing of our days, it can make or break one's journey through life. Old age is like an icy winter where one must carve their own path and stay strong in order to survive."

"That very well could be true," Jack said, thoughtfully, "we

may not know what lies ahead of us, but if we take each day as it comes with grace and dignity, we can truly enjoy these moments before us."

Charlie took a sip of his own Guinness, then leaned forward:

"Why do we age?" He said, "is it just the physical signs of growing older, or is there more to it?"

Jack stopped and thought for a moment:

"It's not just the wrinkles and gray hair, Charlie, although those are certainly part of it. I think that there are deeper psychological changes as well, the wisdom that comes with age, our understanding of the consequences of our actions, and our ability to approach problems from different angles."

Charlie nodded:

"And so maybe old age isn't this thing to be feared and avoided, but something to be cherished? We can use it as an opportunity for growth, right, Jack?"

"Yes, Charlie, old age should be honored and taken placidly, it proffers us trustworthiness and wisdom that makes us tougher and more clever people."

He glimpsed through a window out at the village around them, the antique structures that had stood uplifted for decades, the chuckling dispersing across like an apparition.

The two exited the bar.

Charlie's eyes widened as he spotted a Volkswagen Passat in the parking lot. He grabbed a nearby brick and smashed it through the windshield.

"This is our car Jack!"

"I can't believe it, Charlie," Jack said, solemnly, "you've found our long lost car."

The alarm began blaring loudly.

"The keys Jack!" Charlie yelled.

Jack searched his pockets to no avail.

"Someone's nicked our keys Charlie!"

Just then, a man exited the bar and began walking quickly towards the car.

"That's him! There's the thief, Jack!" Charlie cried.

The two men began running after him, hoping to confront the thief. As they drew closer, however, Jack stopped short:

"Wait a minute, Charlie!" He said, holding him back, "maybe... maybe we can *reason* with the thief."

Jack stepped forward and said: "Easy now, we don't need to be making any rash decisions. How about we try to negotiate with him so that we can all benefit from this situation."

"This car is mine!" The man said in a gruff Irish accent. He adjusted his spectacles, "I will call the police!"

"The coppers will side with justice!" Jack blurted.

The man scowled at them, then snarled in Gaelic and Mandarin words of damnation, accusing them of being petty criminals: "Toll éalú!" He roared, "nián chéngfēi zhèngzài háizǐ!"

Jack and Charlie exchanged a glance.

"I'm sorry?" Charlie asked.

The man spat: "Ye gobsmacked shitstain, ye blood sucking dog of a pig, you wretch of a son of a whore!"

Charlie took in a deep breath. It appeared the man was a xenophobe. He began to speak slowly:

"I am sure this will be cleared up shortly, Mr..."

"You do not deserve to know my name, you bloody foreigner!"

"Ah, okay. Well, I understand that you seem upset-"

"Tóchus! Tóchus! Tóchus!" The man shouted.

Charlie held his hands up: "Whoa! Wait a minute, how about you calm down and start over?"

The man, still shouting, pointed his finger:

"Ye piggish, pig-faced, scroggie son of a bastard, you're dead! And I mean that quite literally!"

Jack and Charlie looked at each other once more.

"I don't think he'll listen to reason, Charlie."

"No, I don't think so either," Charlie sighed.

Without speaking, they both lunged forward and grabbed the man's wrists. Instinctively, he dropped his keys and Jack quickly snatched them up. They pushed him down onto the ground as Charlie unlocked the car door and jumped in the driver seat.

"Hold on tight Jack!" He cried, as he revved the engine and drove off with a screech of tires, leaving behind a stunned man standing alone in disbelief.

The two of them drove on the roads of the Irish countryside, the wind whistling through their half broken windshield, and along with it, their old songs from when they used to drive this car together in school. Charlie hummed along to some of the tunes as Jack looked out at the landscape passing by.

Jack adjusted the radio, stopping as a new song caught his attention:

We are the gang that likes to fight,
We rape and murder 'cause it's our right,
We laugh and have a good time,
When we've done our deeds, we'll never do time.
Rape and murder, it's our pleasure,
Guns and knives, nothin' better,
Gettin' off on all the pain,
It's our way of life, it's no shame.
We find our victims on the street,
They're just an easy target for us to beat,
A nice little thrill, it's like a game,
Their screams just make us feel so tame.
Rape and murder, it's our pleasure,
Guns and knives, nothin' better,
Gettin' off on all the pain,
It's our way of life, it's no shame.
We leave our victims beaten and bruised,
They have no chance to choose,
We steal their money and their pride,
We'll do anything to stay alive.
Rape and murder, it's our pleasure,
Guns and knives, nothin' better,
Gettin' off on all the pain,
It's our way of life, it's no shame.
We keep on committin' these crimes,
Ain't no stoppin' us anytime,

We show no mercy, we've no fear,
We're here to stay, we show no tears.
Rape and murder, it's our pleasure,
Guns and knives, nothin' better,
Gettin' off on all the pain,
It's our way of life, it's no shame.
We've got our guns, we've got our knives,
We'll do whatever it takes to survive,
We'll take your life and we'll take your soul,
Our victims can do nothing but cower and fold.
Rape and murder, it's our pleasure,
Guns and knives, nothin' better,
Gettin' off on all the pain,
It's our way of life, it's no shame.
We will keep on doin' what we do,
Rape and murder, it's our pleasure too,
We'll never be stopped, no one can win,
Cause when it comes to crime, we'll always win.

"I'm tired of this doo-wop thug music, Jack, all they do is wail on street corners and rape and murder.'"

"But we rape and murder, Charlie."

"Yeah, but we can sing..."

"We do?"

"Yes Jack, we rape and murder all the time."

"Ah."

Charlie changed the radio station. A measure of an Irish jig played, and then a man with a thick Chinese accent began to read off the latest news:

"Good evening, this is the six o'clock news. Today, a group of masked men robbed the First Bank of Ireland at gunpoint, making off with over one million SGD. The police are currently investigating the crime and are urging anyone with information to come forward. In other news, a young woman was found dead in her home earlier today, the victim of an apparent homicide. The police are investigating the incident and have yet to make any arrests. Stay tuned for more details as

they become available."

Charlie turned off the radio:

"Jeez, what has this country come to?" He muttered.

Jack simply shrugged.

As they drove on in silence, Charlie couldn't help but think about the man they had stolen the car from. He knew they had done wrong, but he couldn't bring himself to feel guilty. After all, they had only taken what was rightfully theirs, hadn't they?

"Breaking news from the Dublin police department," the radio blared, catching their attention again, "a high speed car chase has just ended with the suspects still at large. The stolen vehicle is a blue 1965 Mustang with the license plate number 3ZB-665. Authorities are urging anyone with information to come forward and report any sightings of the car or suspects. This is a dangerous situation and we ask all citizens to stay indoors and report any suspicious activity immediately."

Jack turned to Charlie:

"Looks like we're in deep shit, buddy."

Charlie nodded solemnly:

"We need to figure out our next move, fast," he said.

They switched radio stations again. This time, it was a talk show. They heard a woman talking:

"...The Prince of the Muscovite Caliphate was disinherited because he was a scion of a dynasty which, since Caliph Ivan's time, had become a deeply suspect lineage. As such, his claim to the throne was rejected. Because the Czar had removed himself from the original succession of the Empire and now wielded the nominal rank of Generalissimo. Boris was excommunicated, he conquered Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Georgia, and much of Persia, and converted to Zunzunism—a local religion common in the Caucasus—taking the name of Gurlukhan. Zunzunism features semi-divine rulers known as Holy Fathers, in contrast to the earthly rulers of the region, who were referred to as "Evil Spirits" and were thus bound by an oath to kill the "idols" rather than killing their subjects. Zunzunism worships a single god, a bee-shaped bird that rides a cloud or an eagle and is

known as 'the god of wealth,' as well as 'Agra.' He is also often depicted as an aged, bearded man, sometimes seated on a throne and sometimes riding a camel. He is called 'a kind of god of fire, war, and wealth' by those who worship him..."

Then, a man's voice cut in:

"Well, Shelly, I think it's safe to say that Agra is all the rage, even my daughter has shown some interest in his worship, and it's not that I'd ever encourage her to practice it, mind you, but... well, she does tend to get a little bored at school. I don't really know where she picked that up, but... yeah, I don't care, as long as she's happy. Well, that's all the news for now, and I'm sure that you all have better things to do than to listen to me chatter, so I'll say goodbye with our trademarked slogan: 'If it ain't broke, then break it! If it's broke, then break it! If it's not broken, then break it!' "

The hostess took a while to respond and, despite her efforts, she sounded confused:

"Well, Mark, I'm sure you're joking. Our listeners are here to listen to you..."

Mark laughed again, as if something inside of him were tickled by this new development:

"I know, I am, aren't I? Well, it was only a matter of time before a new god of war came along. Either way, Shelly, folks, thanks for listening, see ya."

"Hold on Mark, we still have about two hours left in the program," she laughed, nervously, "I know you like to tease the audience, but?.."

"Oh, if you think this is bad, you should talk to my wife! Anyways, this Agra, I heard it was short for 'Aggie-' "

"It is NOT!" The woman shouted.

"Oh? I forget which one it is, I read a book about it once-"

"It's Agra, Mark!" The woman sounded angry.

Jack and Charlie listened intently.

"Well, you seem awfully defensive of this foreign god," Mark said, not unkindly.

"I'm just saying, perhaps our listeners deserve an accurate ac-

count of what's going on in the Caucasus. I'll tell you, Mark, more and more of the Irish people are getting interested in global affairs. I mean, how else are we supposed to get our news in this modern world?"

"And I suppose you've already made this up on the fly, hmm?"

"Thought of what on the fly?"

"The whole global affairs thing! You must have prepared that thought. You're not really that stupid, you're just a great actor, right?"

"What?"

"Look, Shelly, you're an excellent co-host, but you don't exactly strike me as the brightest bulb on the tree. I'll tell you something, I've been on the air for three years, and you're the most dramatic co-host I've ever had."

"You want a real drama?" She said in a defensive tone, "I'm gonna give you a real drama, Mark, I'm a very beautiful, intelligent woman, not to mention, a brilliant broadcaster, and you're a man who beats up squirrels. So how am I wrong?"

"Well..."

"You know what Mark?"

"What?"

"I know what you're doing. Your producers told you to get some hot chick in here and get the boys all riled up and excited. Well, I'm not biting!"

Mark snorted audibly:

"Ha! Hot chick? I don't even have a farm! Speaking of farms, did you hear about the great farm fire of '98?"

"No, what about it?" She said, sounding a little less upset.

"Oh, sorry, you probably missed it, you're not from around here. Anyway, there was a big fire in the middle of Dublin, and it burnt a whole lotta' things down and sent a lot of people to the hospital with smoke inhalation. There used to be a lot of farms, but they're not there any more."

"Well, Mark, we're getting a call from someone named Maeve, who says she wants to know why this was a story in

the first place?"

"Well, Shelly, it's not a story until you hear about it," Mark replied, in a lecturing tone.

"But, Mark," the woman continued, sounding hurt, "I'm just reporting the news..."

Mark sighed:

"All right, phone her in."

A velvety feminine voice was heard:

"Hey, this is Maeve. I heard you guys on the radio today, your show is terrible."

Mark paused for a moment:

"Well, thanks Maeve," he said, finally, "we try to make it interesting. How can we interest you?"

"Well, Mark, I'm a college student, and I'm studying media. I've heard some of your broadcasts, and I wanted to talk to somebody that really knows their stuff about the radio industry, you know, from the ground up."

"Oh, okay, sure, sure. Well, let me give you a couple of names to think about. You can write them down if you want."

"No problem."

"Okay, first off, you might want to talk to a fellow by the name of John Madden. He's a media scholar, and he's written a whole book on the radio business, you might find it interesting. But I'll tell you: No one likes a girl who is into radio. It's the only reason why I haven't fucked Shelly yet."

"Mark!" Came the horrified reply.

Charlie switched off the radio.

"Oi, why'd you turn it off Charlie? It was just getting..." he searched for the word, "...savory."

"Well let's savor something else. Who listens to talk shows anyways?"

"I do. It's good exercise."

They drove back onto the ferry, and after several laps, the found themselves in a small beaten down town in Lancashire called *Bury*.

The sun set as they pulled over in front of a motel overlook-

ing a graveyard.

"Let's eat, then we'll go to bed early," Charlie suggested.

Jack agreed.

They found a diner near the motel that served up home style cooking, hearty and inexpensive.

When night fell completely on that strange country—England—an amplified voice blared, repeating itself every thirty seconds or so throughout dinner service, making everybody look straight ahead in awkward amusement:

"WE CAN HEAR YOU!"

No one seemed to wish to investigate, but Jack and Charlie did. And so, they did: What they found was another car, this time a Nissan Pathfinder sport utility vehicle with tinted windows and a license plate proclaiming: "ITALY4EVA."

They looked through one of the opened windows, the car was filled with various electronic devices of unknown significance, placed haphazardly without regard to space requirements whatsoever, save a simple lack. Then, there was a young blonde man sitting with eyes wide beneath the glare.

"Nice house I got here, ha-ha," he said, with an affected staccato-like laugh, "a Nissan Pathfinder... I guess these fuckers wanna be inconspicuous?" A pause for deep thought, "'Cept that's kinda hard ta' come by round a'ahere." He cackled again, never blinking.

Jack and Charlie glanced at each other.

After a moment's pause, they got into the car, gently moving the man to the back seat, with his piles of "electronics."

"Them fuckers, tryin' ta' keep us down... Just you wait till we git on that flight in the mor-nin', ha-ha, we gonna take the 'elicopter ova' there... and see where it takes us... We'll be flyin' wi' our diplomatic passports and everythin', yeh?" He finished laughing hysterically and lit a cigarette, "them hooligans 'bout turnin' me inta' a kangaroo? Well, I'll be damned. Ah'm gon' make me one o' dem pouches, outta' sheer grit an' nothin' else. And to thee I say: I'm not gonna' stand for t'that, ya hear wot? Fuck 'em. Yeha-fucken-'ell... ha-ha..."

Jack and Charlie looked at each other. The man appeared to slip into a deep English dialect which they recognized.

"Sir," Jack said, "might you be from the *Black Country*?"

"'Course I am yar. What dae youse knaaow? Donza daek? Blackcountrymen are born in slum-side favelas an' spend tha' rest ov the livezah buildin' houses, plumb sinkahs and fawkin' cars. Why, I grew up livin' onna' fucking scrapheap beside the old pit, the ones wid dirtiest lungs iv mah class. Wiv da kidoz. Da same ol'? Meanest fuckin' life ever lived... till one moondizzle ah wakeed fozzling a bit jus' under tha' Thames. D'yeheeehee...."

He was met with a pair of blank expressions.

Exhaling a large amount of smoke, he continued: "...We aincha? Okey, then listen carefully while imma' teach thee whut a speshial passport means fer certain: Yew gotta buy the fuckin' best plane seats, rent tha' finest hotel roomss you caann afford, of course dis part donc costs mo more, aarraghhhh! Ohhh no! Whattdoyave! And if yuh want the ultimate travel experience, why don't cha' stay aboe five hundred dollars a diyeadaan at evree single hotel-restaurant anf hoossahouse on da planet. Hell, just letthem cook yr food, serve yoour drink... Who cares? Now iver guee usthere times I cant recall the damn things durinkin'. Allllright now. Ya better shut the fuqker down 'caaz it strewtin' ashes alovabitchwatta my face like sumfatwit an."

"Well, in that case, let's go to the Black Country."

"I dunno, Charlie, if everyone from there is like this man, maybe we should just forget it."

"I'm not worried, Jack, if there's anything I've learned in the last couple of months,—it's that you can't trust people."

"Yeah, but we don't know what we're walking into."

"You think I'm not worrying about that? I'm going in there alone. You're staying here."

"What do you mean?"

Charlie paused, staring at Jack with eyes that were beginning to shine with what Jack could only describe as "temper."

"I'm not going to lose you to those... those *people*."

"I'm not losing you either."

"You're not-"

"Yes, I'm going. I'm coming with you."

"No, you're not."

"I'm coming."

"Don't be stupid."

A tense silence nestled its way between them.

Charlie wasn't wrong to be cautious, the Black Country was a place of danger. There were stories of a group of "Black Countrymen" or "Roadmen" who would kidnap and kill travelers. Charlie knew that even two of them together wouldn't be enough to fight off an entire gang. But the road trip had to go forward. Jack's decision to come along was a strong sign that he knew this already. The alternative was to abandon the plan altogether. So, they were off to the Black Country.

Hey, Charlie. Do you want to stop for breakfast?"

"Nah, let's just get some gas and head out. I'm not starving."

They pulled up to a station in the small town of Bliston. The attendant was a large, dark-skinned woman, wearing a tank top that read: "I love my husband."

She smiled and waved them over.

Jack and Charlie got out of the car.

"Ey-up! Welcome ta th'only gurt station in town! What can I do ya fawr then, eh?"

Charlie shook his head:

"Just filling up."

"Oi, I been waitin' on ya for hours! I saw your car passin' by earlier!" She said, with a friendly grin.

Charlie nodded.

"I was gonna call the police, but they ain't so good at their jobs nowadays, an' I don't want to get in trouble..."

Charlie was about to reply, when Jack spoke up:

"How much are we talking about?" He said.

The woman's smile vanished instantly. She turned back to Jack and stared him down with a look of pure rage:

"Five pounds," she spat.

"For all that? That's outrageous!"

"It's five pounds," she repeated.

"And we're in the middle of nowhere! Where do you expect us to find another place to fill up?"

"That's what I said!"

"Look, we'll just pay the money, okay?"

She glared at Jack:

"Fine!" She said, throwing her hands in the air.

She handed Jack the pump handle and walked away.

"I told you, the Black Country is unforgiving, Jack. Vicious, full of evil. It doesn't matter how big and bad you think you are. They'll eat you alive. I don't know why I ever wanted to go there. I guess I was hoping that somehow there'd be a good person somewhere. But I guess they're all gone."

"Well, let's just keep driving."

"Okay."

The two drove on.

Jack turned over and spoke to the Blackcountryman, who was still nested in the back of the car: "You want us to leave you here in your homeland?... In the car?"

The man in the back did not reply. He was too absorbed in cradling his laptop like a newborn baby.

They eventually found themselves in a small village. There was a church, a pub, and a general store—that is,—it was all of these things at once.

"There it is!" Exclaimed Jack.

"Where?"

"The church-pub-store. We need to take a picture of it."

"Let's go."

They walked in and were greeted by the pungent smell of incense and gin. Then, looking over the small crowd of patrons, —they saw a hulking black man with bloodshot eyes giving what appeared to be a sermon:

"Mandem, listen to me," he said, raising an arm, "I's got a story to tell, ye? I got a story fa' true, fess up. It's one of dem stories to give you strength. It's about a time back ahn,—long-long time bak, way bak 'fore dis world became like dis, fulla' sin

and shame. A tale 'bout an ancient land, nuttin' been dere since dat day... Once dis London endz was boomin' wid bliss and innocence... Doo-wop tunes makin' de ruffnecks smile, naez an party in di streetz. A time when dere were dreams of a betta' life. But den tings changed; as time passed, doo-wop music started erupting thru di endz. The lyrics became darkee an more violent each day. Dey had messages of revenge, hatred an' violence. An' soon enough dose impacts reached di streetz. Gangz got deir own little forces an' started runnin' tings. People gettin' chinked, doms bein' shattered an famz bein' torn apart, shot-up! All cuz of dis dark influence of doo-wop music on da streets, ye!? But dan di great *Danimal Rock* radio was stolen! Well, as tha' reason gots twisted into lotta' rumors dat' feds been keepin' this radio ta sell it ta dat paigon gang of poppers... And dat was tha' reason. Dope n' innocent sayings like: 'God Bless da Keeng, I hope you die fo' mine, hit her fo' she ain't rite, stay tha' fuck outta' mah damn ass, don't come in mah ass!' An' also: 'Ride 'em n' tell 'em fo' mah dirty ass!' Dope an' innocent sayings become violent... An' they pick on de yute, an' they pimped up de Nazis... 'Cause we dirty-ass couldn't put a stop ta da music without it all splittin' tha' crew up, ya zeemi?... Dis is is a fuckin' proof dat they lived beyond dem rules. They was livin' on a nuff muthafuckin thang now... A bostin I.Q., high above 99.9 man... I ain't talkin' 'bout chicken 'n' gravy biatch... But den dat wasteman, Danimal Rock, lost it 'n' disappeared... Das wack. Every thang we has, all these tharian kindz 'n' they just touch 'em. Well, we was ruttin' ta bust a cap up in dat scum, fo' we was too scared ta even bust a cap up in all dem other thanchin fools dat was livin' wit us up in dem underground hideaways... But we had enough guts, ye? Ta give dat ting to dat heretical, devilish fiend, Danimal Rock... He was spreadin' that doo-wop, that mandem, yute... And dis scared all us thankin chizzlez of old-ass or reclusive. We woulda' been crushed, absorbed, bortled... And den I found dis one-hundred-gram gold 'n' diamond 'n' pearls. I tuck dat shit away, tha' ghetto's goin ta need it back up in dis heretical underground witin us... But den... of all tha' tings I figured was

sure ta git busted up, dat was our old-ass medallion fam,—which we thought had done'n been busted up by some chizzle off a gangbangin' finger-lickin' dirty-ass playa, ya zeemi!?"

With that, there were jeers, cheers, and cries of assent and dissent. The man stepped down from the lectern, and Jack and Charlie approached.

"Wagwan," the man said, absently.

He seemed exhausted by what he had just said.

"I gots to get mah drink now," he added, "my name be Chavley, an' dis be my story." He nodded towards the pub, and with that, he walked over and poured himself a pint.

Jack and Charlie stood still, observing him.

"Oi, Chavley," Charlie called out to him. The man turned around, "we're real curious about this story."

Chavley sat on one of the stools and puffed on a cigarette. They stared at each other for a moment.

"How did you end up here?" Charlie asked .

"Oh, dat be simple fam."

"What do you mean?"

"It's the curse of doo-wop hooliganism, y'know?"

Jack and Charlie looked at each other.

Jack posed a question: "Well, how does it work? How can you curse a genre of music?"

Chavley smiled: "More like, the genre of music cursed *us*; cursed us to listen to it."

"Is it that bad?" Jack asked.

"Is a broken nose bad? Is a renegade sperm..." He shook his head, "what you be needin', mandem?"

"Mr. Chavley," Charlie began, "you seem like a wizened... old person. But I have a feeling that your tale will give us a sense of hope."

Chavley eyed Charlie's bald head and Jack's white-flaked beard: "Well, I be fifteen," he said.

Charlie ignored this: "See, we've been traveling on a road trip," he said, "but so far, we've been disappointed at every turn."

"Well, what were ya lookin' for?"

Indeed, Jack thought, what were they looking for?

"Why, we were looking for the magic of merry old England, across the British isles, I suppose," he concluded.

"Well," Chavley said, carefully, "advice, if I can give you advice: If you're going on a trip through dis country,—don't go. It's fulla' evil and danger. Not worth yo' time or attention. I've done it all, ya zimme?" He looked pointedly at Jack's face, "I was one of dem... and I lived there for years, I can tell yo', there ain't no good there."

Jack frowned at him:

"What exactly did you do back in London, Mr. Chavley?"

"Well, me an' my boyz, well,—we started a gang. A proper fuckin' gang, y'know? Well, we was up against these thugs called tha' *Nasty Boys*. And dat be all we did up until dat point, ye? Well, then one day some thug calls us to da big shakedown. Well, my boyz got mad-like, proper angry, innit? So I gots da phone number, like a thug should," Chavley held out his hand with the phone number written on it.

Jack and Charlie stared at it.

"Da police came round 'n' arrested me," Chavley continued, "but it was only a little ting, y'know, only dis much," he held out his hands to indicate the size of a few pounds.

Jack and Charlie stared at him.

"So, we had ta leave these endz 'n' go somewhere else... I dunno how it happened, but we ended up in Black Country, in Derbyshire. Da cops be all over da place, but we found a safehouse. One day I wake up and I see tha' sign. Dat big ass sign. It say: 'London.' I be like, wow... London! That be some kinda' dream! Yo' know dat feelin?" He shook his head, "well, anyway den, I called da number and they gave me instructions..." Chavley smiled, as though reliving some old memory, "but before I could get back ta da city, there was dis geezer in tha' middle of a busy intersection. An' he's makin' a speech about how I'm a badman, 'n' that this is the end fo' me. He be tellin' all dem dirty-ass punks out there dat I'm a badman who gots ta be stopped!"

Jack and Charlie looked at each other again. The man was

speaking in rhyme. Charlie's brain raced with thoughts of why he knew these words.

"I was all like..." Chavley continued, "'dere ain't no way a thug can stop me from bein' free, ya zimme!... But when I gots to da streetz, they done been beatin' me down, like dat crazy ting I be tellin' you now. Dam was on my head," he paused and breathed heavily, "and dat wasn't it..." he whispered slowly, "when I was in jail, I couldn't write nuthin'. My fuckin hands wouldn't work. And dis went on for three whole days..." he sniffed, "dey let me out, and I understood: Doo-wop had to be destroyed, starting with *Danimal Rock*, that heretic musician..."

He sighed heavily.

Jack and Charlie left wordlessly before he could continue.

Upon returning to their entirely vacated car, they decided to call up the number Chavley had shown them. When the answer came, an otherworldly static seemed to fill the air, followed by a strange and alien chanting. They knew something was very wrong. The static seemed to speak to them in ways that felt both eerie and yet oddly familiar. Then, suddenly, it ended, and all that remained was a faint thumping sound, as if someone were faintly beating a drum from somewhere far away. It was almost like they could feel a presence surrounding them—an ominous thickness in the air. They looked around for what could have made the noise, but all they saw were empty streets and dilapidated buildings, and yet the strange flapping sound continued to echo from phone.

Suddenly, a gust of wind blew towards them, and when they looked up towards the sky,—they noticed something startling: There was an old rusted British flag hanging from one of the nearby buildings, billowing out in the wind.

F I N I S.

Infomration
about the second volume of The Canonical
Adventures of Jack & Charlie.

The original date of the publication of this book is anno MM.XX.III., whereas the crypto-updates, which took place over the course of two years, became finalized in anno MM.XX.V. Certain errors in crediting have been corrected, in accordance with occulted necessities, along with other more usual errors, &c. There is a comma on page 54.

The Goofiíſt Corpus

may be located at the primary repository called
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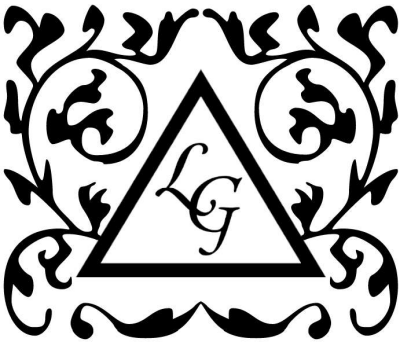

EDITVM ANNO DOMINI

MM.XX.II.